

# The Dedicated

A BIOGRAPHY OF NIVEDITA

by Lizelle Reymond

*an ASIA book*

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SISTER NIVEDITA

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## *Preface*

SEVERAL YEARS ago, in a large city in India, I attended a theatrical performance by a remarkable traveling company, semi-professional, made up of some sixty children. At the end of the play the director of the company invited me to the religious service which was always celebrated by the young actors before they had their supper. On an improvised altar behind the scenes had been placed portraits of various gods, prophets, and great men: Gandhi was neighbor to Buddha, and Sri Ramakrishna's portrait stood close to a Botticelli Madonna. Among all these serene faces, the one which most attracted my attention was that of a Western lady; and my hosts brought the picture to me so that I might look at it closely. It was an Irish<sup>1</sup> woman who had died a few years before, after devoting all her life to India: Sister Nivedita was the name she bore in India.

Lizelle Reymond recounts this life, in pages that are moving in their simple sincerity; the only thing that is left for me to say is how well-known her name is to the people of Bengal, even among the humble and the illiterate. As a matter of fact, Nivedita spent only a few years in India; but her guru, Swami Vivekananda, had given her the key to the country and its people, and she had submitted herself to the austere and exacting discipline which enabled her to make use of this key. Her amazing vitality, both multiplied and channeled by that ascetism and that consecration, was such that even today there is scarcely any field—religion, pedagogy, science, art, politics, society—in which she did not leave her mark. And all the



leaders of India who made the epoch from 1895 to 1914 famous, were her intimate friends.

It is indeed surprising that forty years after Nivedita's death no real biography of her should yet have been written, apart from some booklets in which Hindu children in their primary school, venerating her name as they study, are learning to read. I asked some friends in India about this, and they smiled. Nivedita's life was too closely interwoven with the deep waves of spirituality and nationalism started by the underground struggle for liberty to be disclosed earlier. The biographer who would relive the life of that history's heroine in its most daring flights as well as in its deepest secrets, had not yet appeared. For an intimate understanding of this woman, who was both astonishingly multiple and profoundly one, a person was needed who would do the work with the same fire, the same absolute devotion, that Nivedita had felt for India: a person who would be able to enter into all the anguish, all the righteous anger, all the inner experiences, all the joys also, that she herself knew.

One of Nivedita's greatest friends, the one whom Swami Vivekananda called "Yum-Yum," had a sudden intuitive feeling, a few years ago, as we sat in her XVIth century house at Stratford-on-Avon, that Nivedita's biographer was actually ready and waiting in the person of Lizelle Reymond. And this at once appeared so obvious to us all, that the decision was reached on the spot, and the documents immediately began to pour in from all sides. Archives, huge files of correspondence, the personal recollections of relatives, friends, disciples, and admirers—all this piled up quickly. The patient and punctiliously careful biographer spent several years in analyzing all these, verifying them, completing them, comparing them. She traveled all over India to get in personal touch with Nivedita's old friends—amongst them many a spiritual and political leader who has now won national fame—and to breathe the atmosphere of the places in which her heroine had lived and worked, loved and suffered. Rich contributions to this vast store of material were made with alacrity by Nivedita's brother and

sister, by all the monks of the Order of Ramakrishna who had known her and particularly by the late Abbot of the Order Maharaj Swami Vivajananda, by the present Revered head of the Monastery, Swami Shankarananda, who was in his youth her private secretary for several years, as well as Gonen Maharaj; by Hindus who were her intimate friends, such as Sri Aurobindo, Barindra Ghose, Bhupendranath Dutt, Surendranath Tagore, Ramananda Chatterjee; Western friends like S. K. Ratcliffe, Lady Margesson, Mr. Sturdy, Miss Josephine MacLeod; and many others too numerous to be named and personally thanked here. And some six hundred autograph signed letters of Nivedita's supplied all the details for the reconstruction of the events of her life.

It may surprise some of the men and women who were closely connected with one aspect of her work to discover how manifold were the activities which rounded her life and of which each one only saw one particular facet. The author of this book has risen above any specialized point of view. She has tried to restore to us in its totality, in all its beauty and all its power, this intensely human personality that was Nivedita. Let us be grateful to her for that. Her book is more than a biography. It is a page from the history of India; it is also a course of instruction, from which each reader will draw what he can understand. Some will find here lessons in energy, and in devotion. Others will discover in these pages the yogi's secret of a balanced life, of that mysterious spiritual treasure which India has carefully prescribed for thousands of years. Others may feel the breath of a still higher inspiration. And all will be true.

JEAN HERBERT



# Contents

*Preface by Jean Herbert*

v

## Part One: THE QUESTING SOUL

<i>1. A Stranger Comes to India</i>	3
<i>2. An Irish Child</i>	9
<i>3. The Schoolgirl</i>	15
<i>4. Learning as a Teacher</i>	21
<i>5. Meeting</i>	31
<i>6. The Disciple</i>	40
<i>7. Toward the East</i>	54

## Part Two: THE GURU

<i>8. Early Impressions</i>	69
<i>9. The First Steps</i>	74
<i>10. "She Who Had Been Dedicated"</i>	84
<i>11. First Fruits</i>	90
<i>12. The Path of Sacrifice</i>	99
<i>13. Uprooted</i>	115
<i>14. Disappointment and Discovery</i>	123
<i>15. Lessons in an Interlude</i>	133
<i>16. At the Feet of Sarada Devi</i>	136
<i>17. Zenana</i>	143
<i>18. The Choice</i>	151
<i>19. The Vows for Life</i>	158
<i>20. The School for Girls</i>	162

21. <i>Brahmo-Samaj Friendships</i>	170
22. <i>The Worship of Kali</i>	184
23. <i>Westward</i>	191
24. <i>London Again</i>	198
25. <i>Sannyasa</i>	203
26. <i>Work in the United States</i>	215
27. <i>In France: Decision</i>	220
28. <i>New Points of View</i>	229
29. <i>The New Resolve</i>	236
30. <i>Reunion—and Loss</i>	241

### Part Three: "MOTHER INDIA"

31. <i>A Political Mission</i>	255
32. <i>Spreading the Swami's Message</i>	266
33. <i>The New Life</i>	274
34. <i>Young India</i>	280
35. <i>The Nivedita School</i>	288
36. <i>Dynamic Religion and United India</i>	296
37. <i>The Woman, at Home</i>	303
38. <i>Budh-Gaya</i>	308
39. <i>Svadeshi</i>	312
40. <i>Interlude</i>	317
41. <i>In the Limelight</i>	320
42. <i>"Deeds, Deeds, Deeds!"</i>	324
43. <i>From Art to Bombs</i>	332
44. <i>Exile</i>	339
45. <i>The Last Battle</i>	345
46. <i>Kedarnath</i>	353
47. <i>Final Tasks</i>	361
48. <i>The End of the Journey</i>	368

*Part One*

*The Questing Soul*



# 1. *A Stranger Comes to India*

FOR DAYS the *Mombasa* had glided in scorching heat over the placid sea. At the far mouth of the Ganges delta the speed of the steamship slackened and its powerful wake faded. Slowly it nosed its way between the unseen sandbanks that lurked beneath the muddy waters. Porpoises leaped and played in the foam. Gulls and falcons circled the masts. Heavy flat-bottomed fishing boats with curved bows rose up on the horizon, driven by square-cut sails that dipped down to touch the surface.

On the deck of the *Mombasa* Margaret Noble was watching for her first sight of the shores of India. She was a young Irish-woman who, as a teacher in London, had won some success in writing and public speaking. When the famous Swami Vivekananda had visited England she had become his disciple, and had resolved to give her life to work among his people. And now she was coming to the end of the long voyage. In the delta the sunlit banks merge so closely into the lapping waters that the first contact with India is almost ethereal.

Suddenly land appeared—two narrow reed-covered spits of golden sand stretching to right and left. Flamingos, with sun-tinted wings, flew overhead. Then the land came to life; palms and coconut trees raised their outspread clusters toward the sky. Patches of green became low jungles. Here and there, trees covered with scarlet flowers sparkled like tongues of flame. Tiny villages could be seen, with thatched huts nestling one against the other. On the towpaths, in the fields, silhouettes of men and women made a moving fresco.



For a whole day the boat made its way up the river before Calcutta was sighted, first with its smoke wreaths darkening the sky, then with its buoys, lighthouses and lookouts. Margaret was so absorbed by these first visions of India that she hardly noticed that life on board was gradually collapsing about her.

Passengers exchanged good-bys; cabin boys, stripped to the waist and wearing red turbans, uncoiled ropes and hauled up from the hold mountains of baggage which they threw onto the decks. Curt orders rang out. A swarm of men as handsome as Walter Scott's pirates clambered over the sides of the ship. Yelling and running in every direction, they seized the luggage and sped away to the gangplanks.

From the quay-side arose a strange shouting which filled the air and drowned the noise of the engines: "Heave-ho! Heave-ho!" Hundreds of dark-skinned men in loincloths, with their heads swathed in dark-blue turbans, were pulling at the berthing cables. They bent and stretched in unison, their bodies hanging to the ropes: "Heave-ho! Heave-ho!"

A large crowd was waiting on the quay. The stranger from England blinked her eyes in the blinding light. On all sides scarves and flowers were being waved to greet the new arrivals. Multicolored shimmering headcloths united the women in a dazzling harmony; everywhere color met with color, blending and contrasting in a setting of bronzed faces.

The moment she landed, surrounded by the jostling throng, Margaret saw Swami Vivekananda advancing to meet her. He was wearing a long robe of saffron yellow and a turban of the same color. His feet were bare in his sandals. Margaret noticed that he looked taller than she had ever seen him—taller than the people around him, and stronger too.

She was just about to bow to him, when a monk, dressed in the same kind of robe as the Swami, came forward and placed around her neck a wreath of white flowers interspersed with roses and jasmine. The scented blooms were arrayed in three rows, threaded together with acorns and silver fringes—an ephemeral adornment, but as solemn as those which decorated the statues of the gods. Margaret walked as if in a dream. She noticed that the Swami motioned to the crowd to make way for

them. He spoke an unknown tongue; full of imperious staccato accents.

Passengers from the ship went by, jostling and weaving in and out behind the porters who ran, their almost naked bodies dripping with sweat, carrying pyramids of cases perched on their heads. Guards with gold-trimmed uniforms hustled them as they passed and harried them with their truncheons. Women, veiled almost from head to foot, clustered round a new arrival who was smothered in scented garlands, and blocked the road. Right up to the exit-barriers of the quay, the crowd was master, imposing its slow disordered rhythm on everyone.

What surprised Margaret particularly was the strange dress of the men. Some of them wore robes draped about their chests or their legs which revealed their muscular bodies; some wore long flowing shirts taken in at the waist by a colored waistcoat; others, tight or loose-fitting robes. Precious stones sparkled in the ears of bearded hairy giants with heads enveloped in turbans of light muslin. Some had their heads completely shaven, others had them tonsured with a long wisp of hair on top; some had a bun over their right ear kept in place with a long pin, others had flowing locks which fell in waves over their shoulders. Near the door of the Custom House, through which the travelers passed one by one, a hermit, motionless, his head covered with ashes and his body smeared with red and white, meditated in the shade of a parasol of plaited palms. He was like a bronze statue. Joss sticks burned around him.

The town was a mile or so from the quay. The carriage bearing Margaret and the monks advanced with difficulty between vehicles of all kinds converging on Calcutta. It found a place at last in the procession made up of traps drawn by long-horned bullocks, carts weighed down by the most heteroclite bundles, wagons covered with tarpaulins, and rickshaws pulled by gaunt and sweating natives. Two-horse carriages with closed wooden shutters overtook the rest, their twin coachmen cracking their whips and shouting to the crowd to make way. The calm voice of the Swami rose above the hubbub: "And our London friends, Margaret, how are they? Have you good news of your Mother? What new work have you undertaken at school?"

The carriage now followed an avenue of trees with thick, shining foliage. On both sides tiny, low cottages appeared buried under masses of green lianas and shrubs. Lights could be seen in the rooms and people were seated half naked in the doorways. Tousle-headed children played with young goats and chased after crows. The atmosphere smelt of burnt oil, peanuts, and ground ginger.

Margaret was to stay temporarily with some friends of the Ramakrishna Mission who lived in Park Street. As he left her there, Swami Vivekananda said, "Settle in and get some rest. But I advise you to start work tomorrow. I shall send you someone to teach you Bengali."

During the evening, as she unpacked her papers, Margaret opened her notebook and wrote a single line: *28th January, 1898. Victory! I am in India.*

Perhaps because of her weariness and excitement at arriving, she slept badly the first night. In her dreams she could still hear the advice of her traveling companions. "You must take care day and night. In India there is danger everywhere, in the water which slowly kills, in the fruits which poison, and in the flowers which intoxicate. It is a strange country where it is more serious to inflict the slightest injury on a cow, a monkey, or a peacock than to murder a man." For a moment she saw herself in a jungle from which she could not escape because the surrounding land was deep in floods. A tiny, sun-bronzed boy was leading her by the hand. At last the trees became blurred. The wind in the trunks became voices. Margaret found herself alone among a crowd of strangers, submerged by people who kept approaching her. She tried in vain to speak to them, to tell them how she loved them, but the words would not come. Then they threw her armfuls of jasmine garlands, voluptuous and intoxicating, which fell at her feet.

She woke in tears.

To discover India in January is an enchantment renewed each minute. For several days Margaret let herself go, like a child, intent on grasping all the most colorful spectacles which could satisfy her curiosity. How difficult to concentrate, even on

writing a letter, when an ecstatic nature beckoned you through the open window! On the flowering hibiscus branches magpies had built their nests within arm's length. The garden shrubs seemed adorned as if for a Venetian carnival, with curious flowers that had huge, thick, bell-shaped corollas into which humming insects darted. Unkempt lianas curled round the tree trunks and dangled into space, their tendrils swaying in the breeze. The air was warm, full of strange clamors which arose from the street, beyond the garden wall.

The temptation was too strong; it was impossible not to go out and wander into the town to see everything for oneself!

Calcutta is a town of many aspects. First, it is the big capital city with its colonnaded palaces, its banks built of freestone, its elegant residential quarters, its parks and gardens, its luxurious shopping streets. On the well-designed squares, Indian policemen direct the traffic. Wearing gold-buttoned white uniforms and red turbans, they carry huge parasols fixed to their belts. When they walk, they look like mechanical toys!

But immediately beyond the European quarters the true India re-establishes itself. Jerry-built houses of stone rub shoulders with dwellings of dried earth and roofs made of laths. Beggars and hawkers howl their whining cries. Barbers attend to their customers who sit out on the pavement beside piles of green coconuts presided over by the betel-nut merchant. On the street men sleep, their faces covered with the cloth which, depending on the time of day, serves as turban or as garment. *Sadhus*—or holy men—go by in their tattered yellow robes, bent over their sticks to which are attached small ocher-colored pennants. Two or three rows of big brown seeds cover their naked breasts. There are few women in the multicolored throng. They slip by furtively, enveloped in their wide-bordered white *saris* (the garment of the Hindu woman), their faces almost completely hidden.

Margaret made her excursions into old Calcutta in an Indian carriage, a kind of black box fitted out with wooden shutters which can be closed at will. She relied on the coachman to drive her, like a veritable magician, through her land of a thousand and one nights. This mysterious coachman wore a voluminous turban of lemon yellow beneath which his copious locks were

swept up over the neck. A ring of gold adorned his ears. He skillfully clicked both his tongue and his whip at the same time. He rolled his eyes and smiled broadly whenever his horses broke into a trot.

In a street near where Margaret lived there had been opened at street level a whole gallery of prodigious little shops, crowded together like cells in a honeycomb. The widest ones, which were two or three arms-lengths across, displayed their goods according to the traditional rules. There was one which Margaret never tired of looking at. With his legs crossed beneath him, the shopkeeper dozed amid his jars and copper vessels and his baskets of corn; calm, a flower stuck in his ear, and chewing a betel leaf, he awaited his customers. His slippers lay on the pavement in front of the shop. Behind him, in the shadow, a host of mysterious, dusty objects dangled in clusters—necklaces of herbs, shells and seeds, knickknacks and glassware, bracelets and bells, statuettes and perfume-pans.

At nightfall, oil lamps and smoky torches illuminated these little shops with a curious light. At this hour the shopkeepers would tell their beads with the fixity and concentration of great worshippers.

The day after her arrival, Margaret was visited by a monk whom Swami Vivekananda had sent to teach her Bengali. He wore the novice's white robe and, except for one small patch of hair, his head was completely shaven. Clumsy, childishly timid, he left his sandals at the door and waited in bare feet until his pupil was ready, completely oblivious to everything that was not his job. Swami Vivekananda had briefed him carefully. Without looking at this foreign woman who was still ignorant of how to concentrate her mind or create silence within herself, he placed on the table two small books of Our Lord's Sayings in Bengali, which, he said, she should translate into English as soon as possible. Margaret, abashed, asked, "The words of what Lord? Jesus? Krishna?" She felt herself floundering hopelessly. The monk did not understand what was troubling her, and replied placidly, "Our Lord Sri Ramakrishna."

"Ah, yes, of course. . . ." Margaret felt herself blush. She hesitated a moment and then said, "Let's start work."

## 2. *An Irish Child*

ABOUT THE year 1825, Ireland was in the grip of a merciless guerrilla struggle which pitted man against man, family against family, and group against group. Divided by the shifting frontier of their creeds, Catholics and Protestants fell upon each other, while at the same time the tides of revolution against the English crown grew more thunderous and menacing. Ireland cried out to heaven as it set its course for liberty.

To outlaw those who rebelled against the King, an Act was passed which forbade such rebels to purchase land, engage in business transactions, serve on juries, teach in schools, carry arms, or ride horseback, and denied them burial in consecrated ground. This infamous Edict was recited by patriots every evening after they had said the Lord's Prayer.

It was at this time that a man by the name of John Noble acquired an almost legendary renown throughout the whole country. He was directly descended from the Nobles of Rostrevor (a small town in the North of Ireland), an old Scottish family that had settled in Ireland toward the end of the fourteenth century. A Protestant, he was minister in the Wesleyan church in Northern Ireland, where politics and religion were inextricably intermingled; and as he moved to a new congregation every three years he went preaching up and down the country until he knew every household, even on the most outlying farms. Although his ancestors had violently persecuted the Roman Catholics, John Noble and his supporters now took their side and fought with them in the struggle against the pro-English "Church

of Ireland." Now and then a bomb would explode, or a meeting of patriots be broken up. Retribution followed, but was passed over in silence; a few men were hanged, but other patriots took their places. Meanwhile, Noble continued the fight relentlessly after his own fashion, serving both God and his war-torn country.

In 1828, when he was forty years old, John Noble happened to meet an eighteen-year-old cousin-by-marriage, Margaret Elizabeth Nealus, who, in spite of the opposition of her family, became his wife. Their married life was extremely happy; but in 1845 John Noble died, leaving his widow with six children to bring up under conditions of great difficulty; the oldest child, John, was only sixteen.

It was the fourth child, Samuel, whose daughter Margaret journeyed to India in 1898 to work with Swami Vivekananda for the women and children of that land; and, like his father before him, he established a heritage of idealism and independence for his own child. When he was old enough to work he was apprenticed to an uncle who was a cloth merchant. Though he had no particular leaning toward business, he possessed the intelligence and conscientious industry to become an efficient employee, and he was proud to take his earnings to his mother—until one evening he announced that all commercial transaction was legalized theft, and he was not going back to work in the morning! It took all his mother's perspicacity and poise to calm the boy's scruples, and although she succeeded it was plain that the seed of something beyond tradesmanship, an ambition of a very different order, was already sprouting in his mind and heart.

When Samuel married (his wife, Mary Hamilton, was as devoted to his mother as he was himself), he set up a shop of his own in the little town of Dungannon, among the heather moors of Northern Ireland, in County Tyrone. But the young couple had hardly entered upon their new life when Samuel Noble began to think of taking up his father's work. He, too, dreamed of performing heroic exploits to lead men to God and set Ireland free. And before their first child was a year old the young shop-keeper had given up his business, sold his house, and gone with his always-encouraging wife to England to enroll as a theological

student of the Wesleyan church, in Manchester. The baby was left with his mother until he and his wife should have a real home again.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, who was to become known and loved in India as Sister Nivedita, was born on the 28th of October, 1867, and was named for her paternal grandmother, who was always to be closer to her than—much as she loved and revered her—her mother was. She had a happy childhood in Ireland while her father was facing practical difficulties, and forgetting them in his patriotic zest and religious ardor, far away.

Samuel Noble was able, however, to combine the two. The sermons he delivered while still a student were highly successful and he received regular calls as *locum tenens* for ministers who were ill or on holiday. Neither he nor his wife realized, in the zeal they shared, that he was working too hard. When he was ordained and sent to a church in Oldham, disease had already attacked his lungs. But he had a home now. He went to get his daughter. She was four years old.

She was heartbroken, and no wonder! Her home was with her grandmother, and there were fairies in her grandmother's garden, she firmly believed. The flower beds that surrounded the house marked the frontiers of a domain that was hers, and sunflowers guarded the entrance. In the evening the bluebells would sway in the twilight breeze, and the lilies would open their petals to the butterflies. She knew every bird, and every silvery sprite in the glistening reeds. And, too, she had a firm human friend in "Uncle George," whom the people roundabout called "doctor" because of his healing skill with herbs, though he had never studied medicine. He spent a great deal of time in the woods, and often he would take Margaret with him, and lull her to sleep on his lap when they came home. But she always kept her eyes open as long as she could on those evenings, for then the quiet house would come to life; men sat by the fire and chatted with her grandmother—a black lace mantilla over her white hair—whom they called "the conservative" and treated with the greatest respect. And Margaret was always happy with her grandmother, who taught her to read



from the family Bible, and never tired reciting her favorite Psalms.

At Oldham she found a three-year-old sister, May, whom she had never seen, parents whom she did not know, a strange house in an ugly town. She sought comfort and companionship with the Irish servant, who told her ghost stories. Only when Samuel Nobles health forced a move to a country charge, and the family settled at Great Torrington, in Devonshire, did she begin to feel happy again, and really at home. And by the time she was ten she realized that her father needed her.

Her grandmother was dead now. Two other children had been born, and had died. Margaret's brother Richmond was born soon after the move to Great Torrington. Only the little girl knew how her father's health was failing, and she became his constant companion.

Meanwhile, the country air had apparently restored some of Samuel's strength, and this enabled him to organize his new field of action. He found villagers who were apathetic, and an elite that was more interested in the Russo-Turkish war than in the problems of the country parish. Though a "congregation-alist," Samuel was no sectarian, and he joined forces with the Anglican priest in order to exercise a direct social influence throughout the countryside. By the end of the first year the manse had become a real schoolhouse, where the minister taught not only the catechism but also the rudiments of political economy and history, as well as the fundamental laws which govern the life of peoples. Samuel Noble's influence was felt in all fields.

In his dealings with his family, Samuel set an example of perfect self-abnegation, and his strict habit of "living his religion" gave a moral value to everything he did. On Sundays four services were held, at which family and servants gathered together before the Bible—the only guide to life, where one learns that every individual is directly responsible to God for his actions. This teaching exercised a profound influence on the children. They were convinced that on the Day of Judgment their conscience would rise before them to accuse them of the

most trifling faults they had tried to hide. It was useless, therefore, to deceive themselves and run away: integrity alone could save them and mitigate the punishment of the Almighty.

Such severity, however, excluded neither dreamings nor fantasy; the Bible was also a source for their games, as Samuel was well aware. Thus they played together, on a Sunday evening, when Mary looked after the children while her husband was celebrating the last service in the chapel. How delightful it was! The little girls prayed fervently, their heads hidden in their mother's skirts, and listened with rapt attention to a page from the Bible. Mary told the story with such a wealth of detail that the sacred drama came vividly to life before their eyes. The children would seize palm fans, feather headdresses, shell necklaces—souvenirs belonging to Grandfather Hamilton, who in his time had traded with the Portuguese—and became prophets and kings of Israel, proclaiming the victory of the good over the evil, or David playing on his golden harp, or the child Solomon advancing on his royal mule, his head anointed with pure oil, and the trumpets sounding "Long live the King of Israel."

Yet as her father's illness advanced, and he withdrew more and more within himself, Margaret left her games and outings so that she might spend the time with him. Whenever he preached she went with him. She would sit quietly in her pew watching the congregation she knew so well: the shoemaker, the cattle dealer, the lawyer's wife with her son. Entranced by her father's words, she tried to imitate his gestures later when she was alone. She was to retain his little jerk of the head to express assertion, and she copied his air of authority, trying it out on her sisters and her classmates. Though still a small child, she was proud and stubborn by nature, and she impressed on her companions ideas which at first shocked them. However, she also liked to remain alone and invent stories with herself as the heroine.

The times she enjoyed most were those when her father received visitors in his study. One day a missionary, returned from India, was struck by her fervent expression. As he took his leave, he caressed the child's face and blessed her with the

words: "India seeks diligently for her God! India will summon you, perhaps, as it has summoned me. Be ready always." Margaret trembled with emotion and impatience. With her father she looked for India on the map and ran her finger round it. Her eyes were fired with longing while her father held her close to him. That night she went to sleep with a fervent prayer of consecration on her lips.

Samuel was just thirty-four when he died. In his last farewell to his wife, he whispered Margaret's name: "When God calls her, let her go. She will spread her wings. . . . She will do great things." He fell asleep smiling at his daughter's future.

Margaret wept for her father as for a friend. A few days later, a family gathering assembled by Grandfather Hamilton decided that the two little girls should be sent to Halifax College, which was run by the Chapter of the Congregationalist Church.

A new life was beginning for Margaret and May.

### 3. *The Schoolgirl*

IT WAS with heavy hearts that the two sisters arrived at school at Halifax. They knew well that a stern life awaited them there, but in their desire to obey, nothing surprised them—neither the huge building with its scores of windows, nor the pupils all dressed alike in their navy blue and white “gym” dresses. They were soon to discover that most of them were, like themselves, daughters of ministers. Nor were they slow to realize that the real mistress of the house was the school bell, which dictated the hours of work and play. The classrooms were airy and comfortable, and had large pictures on the walls. There were spacious playgrounds and playing fields bounded by hawthorn hedges which extended to the foot of the hill and the white dusty road.

The girls slept ten in a dormitory. Each of them had a wardrobe by her bedside, which served not only as a repository for dresses and underclothes, for the school coat and hat with its striped ribbon, but also as a shrine of fancy where precious knickknacks—a ribbon of blue silk, a withered flower, a photograph, a polished stone—remained inviolate and could be retrieved during their leisure, to witness silently to the hours of freedom spent playing on the moors, every Wednesday afternoon. On that day they would go off in double file to the top of a high wind-swept hill, where Margaret was soon to read *Wuthering Heights* to her friends and act the part of Emily Bronte’s heroine.

But, indoors, school life was austere. The headmistress, strict toward herself as well as others, paid as much attention to moral education as to intellectual development. A missionary by training—she was a member of the Plymouth Brethren—Miss Larrett loosed upon the whole school a wave of genuine religious fervor and stirred up a powerful surge toward self-sacrifice and repentance, with the result that her pupils under her leadership practiced every kind of self-denial to conquer their sins and overcome their faults. Many made vows to remain chaste, to dedicate their lives to God, to renounce facile pleasures, never to touch alcohol. The exercise of personal sacrifice became part of the general training.

Margaret felt Miss Larrett's influence very deeply; she was afraid of her, but admired her all the more for that. Already more advanced in her studies than other girls of her age, she had no difficulty in becoming the ideal pupil, though her independence and high spirits got her into trouble frequently. She was a pretty girl, too, with a halo of golden curls; and once, when the headmistress discovered signs of pride in her, all her hair was cut off as a means of discipline, and not allowed to grow again for a year!

Every evening, when all the school had knelt together and prayed aloud. Miss Larrett would publicly announce the misdeeds of various pupils, and Margaret was often thus taken to task. On her knees, the tears streaming down her face, she felt neither anger nor rebellion, but only a burning desire to make amends. To discipline herself, she gave her pocket money and her share of the "Sunday sweets" to her sister, and herself performed tasks imposed upon May.

Here again, however, this strict mode of life did not prevent her escape into the realm of dreams and fantasy that is beyond the reach of parents and teachers; and she had the power to lead her companions into that world, too. When the last bell had rung at night she would tell stories to her dormitory mates, and bring every detail to life for them all. Thus they reached the halting-place on the Charan road where the patriarch

Jacob lay asleep, his head on a stone. The flocks were grazing after being watered: black sheep and speckled ones. Suddenly the clouds opened, and a ladder stretching from earth to heaven appeared. Angels ascended and descended, moving lightly in the moonlight with their white robes billowing about them. "Ha!" cried the other girls, waving their sheets. "We are the wind in the angels' wings!"

Another story, a favorite, told with variations, related the ludicrous adventures of a drunkard who got lost in a beer cellar and was laughed at by the casks, who could see in the dark. The girls never know how far the storyteller's imagination would lead her, and then, or what would happen next. Once, when Margaret was playing the part of a devil struck down by an avenging angel, they saw her, during the mock battle, tear out a lock of her hair.

At the end of Margaret's second year Miss Larrett resigned, to be succeeded by a headmistress of quite different type. Miss Collins was an intellectual. She taught botany, physics, and the rudiments of mechanics, but she was deeply interested in literature. Under her influence, Margaret immediately found herself confronted with new problems: "Can death really destroy life? What happens to the life element during death if nothing is ever destroyed in the successive transformations?" Margaret was obviously out of place in the atmosphere of dogmatic tradition which reigned throughout the school. Astonished at this child of thirteen who seemed so thoughtful, Miss Collins took her aside and questioned her. She offered her her protection and taught her to discipline her mind, and formulate her own opinions. Then Margaret plucked up courage and asked her: "I believe in God, but I want to understand. How did the first thing begin?" She opened the Bible and read passionately; then with the imperious logic of the bold, she threw it aside for her science book. She trembled at the crime she had committed, but was ready to face the consequences. Fortunately for her, before experiencing this initial crisis of religious anxiety which shaped her whole spiritual development, she discovered,

thanks to Miss Collins, the beauty of religious art and music. A few well-chosen books and pictures had been enough to suggest to her the perfection of form and color, the laws of harmony and balance—which, for her, were sources of a deep-felt joy. Her nascent mysticism had discovered the faith which built the Gothic cathedrals, the love revealed in the face of Christ, and the all-pervading charity of comforting litanies. In chapel whenever the shrill voices of her fellow pupils began a hymn, she shut her ears to them, so as to listen to the throbbing organ notes that welled up within her and to offer up new prayers that filled her heart with tenderness.

She was now maturing quickly. Her expansiveness gave way to reflection. She had come to realize that religion was a vaster science even than chemistry and physics, and that one had to find within oneself, by personal experience, the answer to all spiritual problems.

Twice a year, at Christmas and in mid-July, school life was interrupted, and Margaret and May left immediately for Ireland. Even when they were small children, they made the journey alone: one of the teachers put them on the train, from which they embarked directly, and their grandfather Hamilton met them at Belfast docks and drove them briskly to his home in the country. Through the holidays they "kept house" for him, while he rejoiced in their freedom and let them do everything in their own way.

A retired cork merchant, Grandfather Hamilton was still so busy that he was hardly to be seen during the day. But his activity was only political now. He had fought for Home Rule all his life, and now he was the undisputed head of the "Young Ireland" faction and of those who advocated the distribution of reclaimed land among the peasants. He had risked death or imprisonment ten times over for this reform. His wife, who had died very young, had always backed him up; and when he spoke of her, he would say, "She was a Murdoch, descended from a proud family whose motto was *Go through!*"

When her grandfather put on his boots and lit his briar

pipe, getting ready to leave the house in the morning, Margaret used to dream of accompanying him on his rounds. She had a passionate admiration for him; he had gradually revealed himself to her; she knew very well that his gamebag was full of copies of a clandestine paper, *The Nation*, which he was setting out to distribute—and at last he did begin to take her with him, and soon was taking her everywhere. When he introduced her to his friends he would say, "She is a Noble of Tyrone, my granddaughter, and that of John Noble as well." And in after years Nivedita often said, "The first teachers to show me what a nation was were my grandmother and grandfather": Grandmother Noble and Grandfather Hamilton.

Nor did she leave her enthusiasm behind her at the end of the holidays, for Grandfather Hamilton always selected some books for Margaret to take back to school—Shakespeare, Milton, the lives of Irish patriots, and memoirs and stories of great revolutionists, studies in international relations. She was afraid at first that Miss Collins might forbid this "Sunday reading," but the headmistress understood her unusual pupil, watched her closely, and, under a cloak of discipline, left her quite free.

Without Miss Collins' sympathy and protection, indeed, Margaret's last two years at school would have been difficult. She had grown away from her schoolmates, and although as Chairman of the Students' Committee and as a willing and able tutor she was respected, she did not feel that she was really loved. She was, in fact, considered proud and haughty, when actually the smallest sign of sympathy moved her to tears. She was working very hard now in preparation for her final examinations; and it was at this time, too, that she began to write her first essays. Some of these—mostly sermons on Biblical texts—were published in the school magazine. Others, also religious in inspiration, were read and criticized by Miss Collins. Still others, fervent calls to self-sacrifice and to freedom, were sent only to her grandfather.

With her mother, relations at this time were a little strained, or, at best, uncomprehending. Mary Noble had opened a small



boardinghouse for foreigners in Belfast. Her own life was dull and joyless. Margaret, in her holidays, found her embittered, dogmatic, prone to exaggeration, while she, on her part, was taken aback by her daughter's independent spirit, and by a seriousness so different from her own. But when Margaret passed her examinations brilliantly and left school with the announced determination to earn her own living, one of the things she wanted to do was set her mother free to be her old self again.

## 4. *Learning as a Teacher*

MARGARET NOBLE was eighteen years old when, in the summer of 1894, just after leaving school, she received her first post as a teacher. It was natural that she should have turned to teaching as her profession, and her first appointment was an exceedingly good one: to an excellent private boardingschool for girls, at Keswick. Situated in the English Lake District, housed in a fine old building that had its own literary associations, the school joined Work and Beauty as objects of its program. Margaret taught literature and history; and although the whole experience at first seemed baffling she soon instinctively developed her own way of making her lessons a means of examining her pupils' reactions instead of imposing a prepared course of study. The headmistress, a woman of artistic temperament and independent spirit, watched her with some astonishment, as did also the town's Anglican priest, who had been the confidant of Ruskin and Wordsworth.

It was in her religious outlook that Margaret changed most rapidly now. In contact with the High Church in Keswick, the naïve fervor with which she had adopted her family's strict dogma became a thirst for religious emotion. With her worship of the altar cross, with the flowers, the incense, the candles, she associated the whole of Nature. In the marvelous rituals, the chanted litanies, she beheld the saints and martyrs descending from the stained-glass windows to communicate to her their desire for sacraments of love. As soon as she left the altar her soul would be filled with a deep religious nostalgia. She thought

very seriously of entering a Catholic convent, and even began making applications, but the headmistress of the school dissuaded her.

Inevitably, this new religious attitude widened the temporary breach with her mother. And Mary Noble, unable to understand why Margaret was not satisfied with the spiritual guidance she had received in the family circle, recalled an odd incident: during the family celebration that followed Margaret's birth, while a large assemblage of kinsfolk were evoking the heroic deeds of the long line of austere preachers, ardent patriots, and strong-charactered women who had been the progenitors of this latest-born of the Nobles, an old servant who was looking after the baby wrapped her in a blanket, ran with her to the nearest Catholic church, and had her baptized! The old woman had boasted of her achievement, and so Margaret's mother had learned of it, and she now remembered it with a kind of irrational bitterness! What Margaret was learning in actual personal conviction, however, was that the more the soul develops, and the more beauty it absorbs, the more insatiable it becomes for the Infinite.

She left Keswick in 1887, to try a new experiment, that of poverty, and to test her powers of renunciation and self-sacrifice. This choice took her to an orphanage in Rugby, where twenty girls, charity pupils, were being brought up to be domestic servants. Margaret spent a year there, teaching and sharing her pupils' manual labors; and she used to tell the older girls—aged sixteen and about to set out into the world—of the joy they would have in "fulfilling themselves" and living according to the ideal of their faith. For herself, a wider field opened after this experience.

She was only twenty-one when she was appointed mistress at the secondary school in Wrexham, a large mining center. She had eagerly desired such a post as this, in order to gain experience in welfare work and to put in practice what she conceived to be her "ideal." And a spacious field of action awaited her. As her regular teaching took only half her time, she immediately began to organize her individual life. Through her pupils and their families she went to the heart of the working-

man's existence, and came to know the life of the miners by visiting their shabby and dreary homes.

Wrexham was indeed a dreary town, jerry-built in a time of plenty, with houses piled one on top of another so as to mass as many people as possible around the mines. The omnipresent coal dust had given an air of sameness to the wretched hovels, the untidy patches of garden with tattered washing on the line, the slimy alleys. The horizon was lost behind slag heaps, and the sky was a mass of smoke belched from factory chimneys. Whatever the season, the days were always gray and dark.

In the center of the mining quarter stood St. Mark's church, with an extensive parish. Margaret enrolled there as a district worker, undertaking welfare research, visiting slum households, searching out pregnant women in factories, looking for waifs and strays. Reports in hand, she would request the necessary succor with such gentle persuasiveness that the clergymen were amazed. Yet in her very conscientiousness she met with a serious obstacle.

For Margaret gave assistance without discrimination: to the poor of St. Mark's, to people who never went to church, even to members of other congregations. Inevitably, disputes arose. Seeing that her efforts might be paralyzed, and unwilling to stir up strife, Margaret gave up this work. But she was disappointed, and a smoldering anger burst into flame in an open letter which she sent to the *North Wales Guardian*, and which exposed the Church's internal policy.

With this gesture the pamphleteer was born.

She was quick to discover that her pen, properly wielded, could exert a greater influence than her social activities; and she lost no time in putting it at the service of the oppressed. The poor of Wrexham had found a champion, who wrote under many pseudonyms. ("An old, old woman," "An interloper," "Churchman"; more often the masculine-sounding name, "W. Nealus"). She wrote, and published in local papers, "A Visit to a Coal Mine, by a Lady," "A Page from Wrexham Life" (this was an appalling description of the slums), a series of "Papers on Women's Rights," a number of critical political reviews. After ransacking the records of the Education Authority, she wrote

articles (signed "W. Nealus") to urge the revival of plans, long dormant, for a cultural center and a sports stadium. Social journalism had become a personal passion. . . .

During this period, when Margaret was collecting for the mines in the coal offices themselves, she met a twenty-three-year-old Welshman, an engineer working in a chemical laboratory, with whom she became friendly. One day when they met at church the young man took the opportunity of introducing her to his mother, a smiling old lady who invited Margaret to her house. "Come and have tea with us by the fire."

After her lessons, Margaret used to climb the two flights of stairs to her friend's flat. She knocked and entered quietly. He would be waiting for her in a comfortable armchair, smoking his pipe. His mother would bring tea. The room was quiet and spotless, and pleasant to work in. Margaret sat in front of the fire and hid golden chestnuts in the hot cinders, enjoying the intimate, friendly atmosphere. Their tastes, joys, and desires were the same; so was their unconfessed love.

After his day's work, he searched the newspapers to find documentation for her articles, which she brought to him for discussion. They read Thoreau, Emerson, and Ruskin together, dreamed of the same ideals and the same sacrifices. Sometimes on a Sunday they went out into the country and returned intoxicated with fresh air and happiness. The separation during the summer holidays merely served to increase their desire for collaboration in each other's work, for uniting their paths. They were about to become engaged, when the same disease which had killed Samuel Noble struck down the young man and carried him off in a few weeks. In the face of death he remained serene, slipping away quietly, yielding up his life to God so that Margaret's might be doubly blessed. He fell asleep with confidence.

A few weeks later Margaret left Wrexham for Chester, where she had been transferred at her own request. Lonely, and also more mature, she successfully sought a reunion with her family. Fulfilling her earlier dream, she brought her mother to live near her, in Liverpool; May, also a teacher now, had a post in the city; young Richmond studied at Liverpool College. Margaret was with her mother two days each week.

Beginning her fifth year as a teacher, and working with a class of eighteen-year-old girls, Margaret was led by her interest in comparative methods to the discovery of Pestalozzi and Froebel. She had sought with advanced pupils to find the way which they showed her was best to be followed by concentrating on the child. Now she lost no time in searching out and associating herself with the little group of Englishmen who were introducing the "new education," and in Liverpool she looked for and found the teachers who were interested in the same new methods. In this way she met Mr. and Mrs. Logemann, and, through them, Mrs. de Leeuw, a Dutchwoman who had been Froebel's pupil.

This discovery in education led her to self-analysis. She cast about to discover her first childish impressions: Halifax, with the threatening shadow of sin; Ireland with her bold dreams; her father and his indomitable courage. She went so far as to rediscover those obscure yearnings for affection hidden in her childish tears, her concealed weaknesses, and her surges of enthusiasm. All was now clear. This study of herself revealed to her the real meaning of that inner freedom she had always sought, which she had never valued at its true price, and which illuminated the whole existence she had built up around her mother and her studies. She had re-established her mental equilibrium.

The Logemanns were the only people with whom she could discuss her experiments, except perhaps for her sister, whose interest she had aroused. The Logemanns themselves were tireless researchers who had begun a small class of pupils in their flat in order to apply their methods. It was here that Margaret, in her spare time, first tried out the teachings of Froebel, with a class of very small children. Here also she met several young writers of advanced ideas who became her friends and took her to their Good Sunday Club, where a faithful public demanded lectures on learned topics and readings from unpublished works. Margaret and May became enthusiastic members. They had a long journey to the club, but they used to set off arm in arm, laughing at the wind and the rain, and matching their rapid strides to the verses which they recited in turn. The bus fare thus saved enabled them to join their friends in a high tea over which they would sit discussing literature till a late hour.

These young writers encouraged Margaret to write; for their benefit she began to relate the most striking pages of her family history—a series of exciting subjects which fired her imagination and took her back to that Ireland of which she felt so thoroughly a part. Her mother gave her encouragement, for she believed in her daughter's ability, and her emotion came to life before the Nobles, Nealus, Hamiltons, and Murdochs. Margaret questioned her unceasingly: "Tell me about Grandmother Elizabeth. What was she like?"

"She was a girl who laughed at danger. When she was still a child, her father made her stand sentry at a crossroads one day while he helped a group of patriots to escape. She wasn't the least bit afraid."

Margaret signed these stories "Elizabeth Nealus," after the ancestor with whom she identified herself most closely. She read two of them to the Good Sunday Club. Her family, her friends, the Logemanns, were all associated with this first purely literary effort. As potboilers, she did some stories for an insurance company at the same time.

Two full and fruitful years went by thus, and then Mrs. de Leeuw suggested that Margaret help her found a "new school" in London. It was an unhopèd-for opening in the young teacher's individual career, for the capital would offer her unlimited opportunities. She did not hesitate a moment, but followed Mrs. de Leeuw to London as soon as the school year at Chester came to an end.

For Margaret the "small school at Wimbledon" became a daily joy; for the first time she found complete self-expression in her work. Her personality was literally transformed and entirely shook off all the restrictive influences experienced during the successive phases of her professional development. The respectful schoolteacher, transmitting scrupulously the knowledge she had acquired from books, disappeared before the "educator" who guided her pupils step by step toward a world full of new discoveries. Margaret worked now with the object of developing new beings, full of candor and confidence.

Fifty or more children, of from four to six years, played around her, giving expression to their nascent personalities in

accordance with their own inner harmony. Free from restrictions, they were gay, sincere, lively, forging for themselves the tools which suited them best, and which corresponded to their unconscious desires. Margaret would suggest games in which the keener children encouraged the slower ones, and would tell stories that held the attention of the most difficult pupils. She watched the born architects who built with any kind of material—sticks or stones, branches or clods of earth; the born mathematicians who, knowing nothing of numbers, made estimates and took measurements; and the passionate and sensitive dreamers who were moved by the song of a bird or the beauty of a flower. She held them spellbound before their own discoveries, and, placing herself on their level, she helped them to arrange the threads of life they had discovered. The children played their parts as adventurous and victorious pioneers without realizing that an expert hand was guiding them.

School hours were not long, so that Margaret devoted herself more and more to her studies, and collaborated regularly in the work of the Congress of Modern Pedagogy which had its headquarters in London. She often spoke at its meetings, always to demand a complete liberty of expression for the child. "The child's worst enemies," she said, "are overfond parents whose love is possessive and exclusive, or their first teachers who compel them to follow their own conception of life without troubling about the child's own individuality." She was bold in her assertions, but did not risk affirming them unless she could support her thesis with a whole series of accurate observations. It was solid work.

Margaret's laboratory was her classroom. For her writing, she found quiet and privacy in her room at home, because the family was living together in London now. Margaret had her books and her desk, and her mother and sister were careful not to disturb her. But her young brother Richmond had undisputed claim on her attention, and during his holidays they used to take long walks together, or, better still, go to the theater—to see Henry Irving in *Henry VIII*, for instance, or Ada Rehan as Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Richmond accused his



sister of being too romantic, and this was true: a romantic sense of pathos and drama—no doubt due to her educational background and the literary influences of her day—can be traced in all Nivedita's writings and actions, and it is impossible to form any assessment of her character without taking this into account. But it was thanks to her that, before he was fifteen, the boy knew whole scenes from Shakespeare by heart. She gave him *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* to read, while his grandfather concentrated on the Bible. Years later, too, Richmond wrote in a letter: "My sister early in life manifested a fondness for the society of intellectual men. Wherever she went, a literary club was sure to spring up."

In tune with this latter gravitation, Margaret found a new outside interest in her friendship with the Beatty brothers, young Irishmen writing in London. The older, whom she nicknamed "the poet," crowned her queen of a small group of writers united in admiration of Thomas Hardy, who was then at the height of his fame and—because of *Jude the Obscure*—a figure of controversy. The younger, Octavius, a journalist, was editor of the *Wimbledon News*, the organ of Irish associations in England. Margaret had joined the "Free Ireland" group working for Home Rule, only a few weeks after her arrival in London. Two months later she was speaking publicly at evening meetings and organizing centers of resistance in the South of England. Now she contributed several articles on the Boer war, from the pro-Boer point of view, to Octavius Beatty's paper. She also wrote for the *Daily News* on political questions, and she occasionally contributed to the scientific periodical *Research*, and to the *Review of Reviews*, whose famous editor, William T. Stead, became a personal friend.

One evening Prince Peter Kropotkin came to speak to the "Free Ireland" circle, and Margaret, who had long been eager to meet the famous revolutionary exile, seemed to recognize in him the voice of her father, who had died too young to complete his own work and whose task she now sought to accomplish. She felt in him, too, the characteristics of the real leader. Re-

maintaining personally humble and unaffected, he laid down a series of precepts which required the absolute belief of those who obeyed them, and he was able to inspire in each of his followers that complete confidence without which the ideal itself is destroyed by individual ambitions and the leader is trampled down by his own partisans. Later, she used to go frequently to Ealing, that industrial suburb of London where Prince Kropotkin and his wife lived, and talk with him. His remark, "Revolution is only a period of accelerated evolution," formed a theme she liked to discuss with her Irish friends.

In the autumn of 1895, Margaret left Mrs. de Leeuw and opened her own school, the Ruskin School, in another part of Wimbledon. This school was not for children only but was open also to adults who wished to study the modern educational methods. Margaret obtained the co-operation of several celebrated teachers, and the school's reputation was quickly established and spread. One of her teachers was Ebenezer Cook, at that time a fashionable painter of children's portraits, who had advanced ideas about childhood itself. He taught that the world of form and color must be presented to the child, who is an artist without knowing it. In his own career he was now building up his method, and his experiments were being followed and discussed; in Margaret Noble's, it was he who was responsible for the capacity she was later to develop of explaining a picture's composition and value to Hindu artists; he gave her, too, the basic knowledge for an understanding of the Italian primitives.

One of Ebenezer Cook's friends was Lady Ripon, who had an exclusive salon where art and literature were regularly discussed. Here Margaret was welcomed and became active. Thanks to her efforts and those of Ronald M'Neill (later Lord Cushendon), soon to become editor of the *St. James's Gazette*, the salon developed into the Sesame Club, with rooms in Dover Street, and with Bernard Shaw, T. H. Huxley, and other authors and men of science as enthusiastic visitors. At one of the club

meetings Margaret met Lady Isabel Margesson, who, like herself, was interested in the education of young children.

As lecturer on "The Psychology of the Child" and "The Rights of Women," and as secretary of the Sesame Club, Margaret was at the nerve center of all its activities. Ronald M'Neill, who came from Antrim in Northern Ireland and was a convinced Unionist, was of course a violent political antagonist on Irish affairs, but their arguments held no personal animosity and he supported her in most of her work. Two days after a particularly vehement public tussle, he took the chair at one of her lectures and did his utmost to back up her arguments.

Margaret was successful on all fronts: in school, in her social life and work, in her friendships. But it was at this time that she suffered a cruel blow. She had been in love for eighteen months, had made her preparations for marriage, was about to set the wedding date, when another woman, on the score of a previous betrothal, suddenly claimed the man to whom she was—or had thought she was—engaged to be married. In her grief she sought out her old friend and former headmistress, Miss Collins. She stayed with her in Halifax for a week, and came back calm in spirit again. Her friend had told her that this deep suffering had an inner radiation which her relieved soul would perceive: a light divine, ineffable, and full of blessing.

## 5. *Meeting*

SHE RESUMED her activities as if nothing had happened.

No one around her suspected the profound spiritual loneliness into which she had suddenly been plunged. In spite of her old friend's solace, her faith forsook her when she needed it most. The mild and reassuring convictions of her earlier belief gave place now to a stern and implacable resolve to find the Truth at all costs. But what Truth? Margaret was too strong to remain for long in a state of religious despair, although she had no practical means at her disposal for guiding her tired will. As once before, she was going through an obscure phase of indecision which allowed no adjustment between her intrepid faith and her daily life. She accepted the situation. Her exterior life—her profession, the social and political friendships of which at twenty-nine she might well be proud—could not fill the gulf in her soul: a temple forsaken by God.

But Margaret could not live without religion. That was a heritage she had received, a part of life she could not do without. The same question which she had raised at Halifax as to the fundamental "wherefore" of things—and to which no one had ever been able to give a satisfactory answer—remained the central aim of her inquiries. For Margaret the answer to this question was the secret of God's existence. Of this she was convinced by her intuition, which, however, was constantly shaken by the compromises necessary between the law of Jesus and the law of men, and the innumerable adjustments which

had to be made between Church and Society. Margaret could not escape these, for she herself was part of Society. But with a relentless honesty she sifted her ideals and her way of life through the sieve of the faith. The experience had often been difficult, and had led her to reject successively each of the religious attitudes she had so deeply espoused. She had never been assailed by doubts, however, even at the critical moment when it became impossible for her to worship her Creator in the expression of life itself. Her prayer was extremely simple: she followed Thomas à Kempis, in *The Imitation of Christ*: "Be what thou prayest to be made." She believed in God, in the Truth which palpitates in everything, even if man knows not how to perceive it.

Doubtless, in following this difficult path, Margaret had experienced many disappointments that had gradually awakened in her a kind of skepticism, which, however, bore no trace of negation. The reason was that she always sensed, in the vision she was seeking to grasp, something more absolute which escaped her and which became unconsciously the objective of her struggle to reach the Truth. Thus her innate faith carried her forward in spite of all the storms through which she had to pass. One moment she thought she had reached her goal when she was approached by the open-minded group within the Church of England, including the celebrated preacher, Canon Scott Holland. But there again she came up against the wall of intolerance which obscured the vision of the Truth.

Only a few of her friends knew the importance Margaret gave to her spiritual life. Ebenezer Cook was one of these. One day when he came to give his drawing lessons, he said to her, "Lady Isabel Margesson is inviting a few friends to her house to hear a Hindu Swami speak. Will you come?"

Margaret's curiosity made her accept this unforeseen invitation. Much had been spoken of this monk. Who was he? Certain members of the Sesame Club—among others Mr. E. T. Sturdy and Miss Henrietta Muller—told of his extraordinary success in the United States, with so many details (including his

reputation as a *fakir*) that it was difficult to form an opinion. Only Mr. Sturdy could have thrown more light on the subject, for he had traveled extensively in India, but he remained silent. It was known, however, that the Swami would stay at his home.

On the day in question, Margaret arranged to be free. As she entered Lady Isabel's drawing room, which had the blinds drawn for the occasion, she felt somewhat nervous. She was one of the last to arrive, and imagined that all eyes were turned on her as she took the first vacant chair, quickly gathering up her broad silk skirt to avoid making a noise. No one spoke; yet at least fifteen people were in the room. The air was full of spiraling waves of heavily scented incense. Swami Vivekananda sat facing Margaret. He wore a full-cut robe of saffron yellow with a bright red cummerbund. She noticed that he was tall and well built and had an air of deep serenity. He was perfectly calm, self-absorbed, and indifferent to what was going on around him. A coal fire burned on the hearth behind him. He looked at Lady Isabel with a curiously sweet smile as she leaned across and said, "Swamiji, all our friends are here." A door closed, a curtain fell. In complete silence, the chanting voice of the Swami prayed, "Shiva, Shiva, namah Shivaya {I prostrate before you, Shiva}."

He spoke at great length, in a calm, well-modulated voice. From time to time he chanted a line of Sanskrit and translated it into perfect English, obviously taking an immense delight in communicating the words of light. When asked a question he replied in simple language, using poetic images which reflected all the beauty of the East and brought warmth to that foggy autumn Sunday. The whole of his talk exuded an all-pervading intimacy.

Margaret listened with rapt attention. A feeling of complete emptiness had come over her, annihilating her will power and her critical sense. She was subjugated by a strange new force and felt her mind reaching out to broader and vaster regions. This man was a powerful magician of faith! He knew the language in which God could be invoked. Was he one of those

beings who had achieved complete self-realization? Was he one of those ascetic yogis who were said to live in forests in perfect harmony with wild animals?

"Man imagines that God cannot do without him," he said, "but who can help the Infinite? Even the hand that comes to us through the darkness will have to be our own . . . we, infinite dreamers who dream finite dreams. . . ." And again,

"All our struggle is for Freedom, we seek neither misery nor happiness but Freedom, Freedom alone." Magnificent phrases strung themselves together in perfect harmony. They were not ideas thrown up haphazard, as part of an intellectual game; they lifted the hearts of his hearers into eternities. They saw their personalities in a new light, as astonished as spoilt children, who, while possessing the costliest toys, still stretch out their hands to seize the sun and the moon.

Carried away in spite of herself, Margaret experienced a profound peace, a moment of respite in the midst of her intellectual anxiety. Yet when Swami Vivekananda finished speaking, her instinctive reaction was to ally herself with several ladies who were criticizing the Swami's doctrines as lacking in originality. She had not asked any question; now she remained silent. She felt that she must be alone, to ponder over that message brought from a foreign land.

Within a few days, all the London newspapers were speaking of the "Hindu yogi," comparing him to a new Buddha come to heal the wounds of the Western world. He was described as meek and gentle, pure and innocent as a child, yet possessed of a sage's learned wisdom. Three weeks after his arrival sightseers were thronging around his door, he was besieged with invitations, people tried to lionize him. Such publicity left him completely unmoved.

Swami Vivekananda had left India two years before. With his burning faith as his sole guide, with the wealth of wisdom drawn from the lips of his master, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (the Hindu spiritual saint was born in Bengal about 1836, and died in August, 1886, in Calcutta), he had gone to the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, in 1893, with the message of Hinduism,

"the mother of religions," and had been hailed there as a great orator. Now, during this three-months stay in London, in 1895, the story of his triumphal progress through the United States was on everybody's lips.

At Chicago, he had spoken first to an audience of several thousand people: extemporaneously, looking into the eyes of his audience and seeing there thousands as his brothers and sisters eager for the living knowledge of the one Divine Being, worshiped under a thousand different forms. As he spoke to them of God, of the single Truth revealed by a thousand symbols, of the identical aim of all religions, his own emotion was instilled into his hearers. They heard in him a yogi; a non-Christian, who, instead of dwelling on the divisions between men and their rights and wrongs among their fellows, felt only the aspiration of souls toward tenderness and peace, and lived again with them his own experience of love. By his breadth of conception and his effort to surmount every obstacle he had literally stunned his audience.

After his Chicago visit he had passed through a period of real hardship, for he had no church or association to support him, and the little money he possessed had quickly disappeared. But suddenly the way had opened up before him—the public had made an idol of him and dragged him from town to town to speak. Swami Vivekananda had concurred, while allowing nothing in this rapid change of affairs to shackle his liberty, compromise his poverty, or dim the brightness of his message. His spiritual mission had made him triumph over all the snares laid for him by a young, intolerant, and materialist society. To it he brought not a new religion, nor the teaching of any particular master, but the secret of individual liberation—the unassailable treasure of that India where spirituality is a tangible mode of life and inseparable from poverty.

Swami Vivekananda had made both friends and enemies, but what was more important, he had gathered about him a handful of immediate disciples. After having achieved his youthful ambition of making himself a great orator in the service of God, he had become a meticulous instructor of those souls who had entrusted themselves to him, the guru communicating to his pupils not only the desire for renunciation but also the very



taste of the sacrifice they had made of their lives. Swami Vivekananda was no longer working alone. In this summer of 1895, before coming to London, he had conferred the major initiation of *sannyasa*—the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience—on two of his disciples—one woman and one man, Swami Abhayananda and Swami Kripananda—and had initiated five others as novices, they formed the group of future workers to help him.

After this first meeting at Lady Isabel's, Margaret heard two more of Swami Vivekananda's lectures. But her real interest lay in the informal meetings which Lady Isabel organized. She changed her schedule completely so as not to miss a single one. To hear the Swami speak was for her a gradual means of escape from the lethargy which had choked her and from the skepticism which she had advertised too openly to be able to deny it.

Swami Vivekananda found that he had a select, but difficult, audience. If Margaret, who had studied the writings of Frederick Denison Maurice, was quick to adopt a stubborn attitude of mind, her friends were even more inclined to base their belief on psychological problems only. The Swami found the game difficult but was ready to play it. Having measured the intellectual capacity of his opponents, he began his exposition of the Vedantic attitude by examining its intrinsic scientific qualities to a point where the limits of each individual school of thought were transcended. Every discussion had its roots in the analytical psychology of the Western world. Margaret excelled in keeping the Swami along these lines by asking precise questions, and by using the very philosophical arguments which he contributed himself.

Swami Vivekananda was well aware of Margaret's state of mind. He knew by personal experience how difficult was the upward path of escape from that pessimism he had suffered himself, from those agonies of doubt which enclose the soul in darkness and seem to shut out all hope. Each painful step along that path constituted an additional element in the building of character. The intellect compares all facts, seizes each new argument, seeks analogies. Swami Vivekananda had experienced all these backslidings before falling at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, overwhelmed with love of the saint. Margaret was still struggling,

still feeling her way. With a sure touch, he directed her newly awakened sensibility; for practical purposes, he substituted the word "self-realization" for "faith," and described in detail all the stages of spiritual life, from the faithful worshiper protected by the rites of his church or sect, to the worshiper projected into the freedom of the realized soul. "It is well to be born in a church, but it is terrible to die there." Thus he described the joy of him who casts off his chains and goes forward along the glorious path of renunciation, of him who loves with a love which excludes all possession, of him who becomes the patient instrument of God's will—*jnana*, *bhakti*, *karma*, the three great paths of knowledge, love, and disinterested work, which lead the human soul to the intimate knowledge of God.

Margaret could only guess how great was the freedom to be obtained; she would never have thought this could have been reached by the imposition of a self-discipline which was harsher than any she had known. In the discussions she found herself in unfamiliar regions where no landmarks were yet visible. Gathering together the divergent views of his hearers, Swami Vivekananda reduced them to the words of Sri Krishna in the *Gita*, "All these are threads upon Me, as pearls upon a string." One day, he suggested a subject of meditation for each of his hearers: "Both the mind and the body are dominated by a third element called Self." What was this Self that was neither soul nor ego? Margaret could not give the answer. Swami Vivekananda let her for a certain period search for it alone, for he knew that she was relying merely on her powers of reason. But, although she retained her independence of mind with regard to the Swami, her positivist ideas were already seriously shaken.

The success of these study groups was such that those who attended them begged the Swami to deliver a public lecture before leaving to return to America. He accepted. The elite of London gathered that evening at Princes' Hall. The monk established contact with his audience with these cutting sentences: "Have not a few words of Christ or Buddha done more for humanity than the invention of machinery or printing? Do you believe that the peace-loving Hindu would think of paying the price required to gain a knowledge of Western civilization,

with its unbridled intolerance, its bloody wars, and its commercial prosperity?" Lost in the crowd, Margaret closely followed the Swami's thesis. Several days later he explained to an inquisitive journalist, "I am the exponent of no occult society . . . nor do I believe that good can come of such bodies. Truth stands on its own authority, and Truth can bear the light of day. . . ."\* This was the very Truth which Margaret had sought for so long. Was he going to reveal it to her there and then? Several times during the philosophical discussions she had foreseen the moment when her logic would declare itself satisfied, although she maintained her defensive position, so as always to reserve the right of dissecting her own religious experience.

This questing soul, the teacher Margaret Noble, realized that Swami Vivekananda had provided her with a series of springboards from which to plunge within and ask herself searching questions. She had at last discovered a religion whose foundations, classification of elements, and forms of worship could be discussed scientifically; a religion which constantly maintained contact between spiritual and practical life through the medium of experience. Such a religion relied exclusively on what was noblest and best in mankind—that quality of spiritually progressive freedom as opposed to sin-entangled slavery. As Margaret analyzed these reasons, with considerable lucidity, she declared herself the Swami's disciple by addressing him as "Master."

This word, on her lips, proclaimed the submission of her intelligence. She had understood that Swami Vivekananda lived for the Truth, and that he would serve It wherever It was to be found.

Recalling those first meetings and their decisive influence on her life, Margaret was to write later, from Calcutta, in 1904, in a letter to a friend: "Suppose he had not come to London that time! Life would have been like a headless dream, for I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did. But if I had known more of life I should perhaps have doubted whether when the time came I should certainly recognize it. Fortunately, I knew little, and was

\* *Life of the Swami Vivekananda*, 1st edition, vol II, p 404.

spared that torture. . . . Always I had this burning voice within, but nothing to utter. How often and often I have sat down pen in hand to speak, and there was no speech! And now there is no end to it! As surely as I am fitted to my world, so surely is my world in need of me, waiting—ready. The arrow has found its place in the bow. But if he had not come! If he had meditated on the Himalayan peaks! . . . I, for one, had never been here. . . .”

Margaret Noble, Sister Nivedita, was always to acknowledge her debt to this Master who had now come into her life.

## 6. *The Disciple*

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA's sudden extraordinary hold over Margaret Noble had confronted her with a *fait accompli*. She had felt bound to declare herself his disciple. Nothing had compelled her to do so, except perhaps her own will power, for she never stopped halfway.

Swami Vivekananda saw her come to see him—in silence. At that moment, his benevolent smile created an indissoluble bond between them. She came forward bravely, relying merely on her intelligence and force of character, but without relinquishing any part of her personality. He refrained from calling her “my disciple,” for the moment had not yet come for that, but greeted her already as the woman she was to become. He saw her beyond the frontiers of her ego, rich with a richness unknown to herself, and perceived the astonishing dynamism of her character and her innate faith in the unknowable Absolute. *She was just the woman he needed to do his work in India.* But could he rightly be proud of this fruit which had grown up of its own accord, and which was now developing within itself the seed from which he was to profit?

Swami Vivekananda's departure for America, in November, 1895, gave Margaret the unexpected opportunity, in spite of her regret at losing the Swami, of freeing herself from his immediate influence and taking stock of her position. She drew up a systematic plan of work and began to study the Swami's philosophical ideas along the lines he had suggested. She spent a

fascinating winter, giving up all her secondary interests in order to have time to read. She waited impatiently for the spring which would bring him back, overjoyed at the prospect of showing him what she had achieved.

The prodigious religious erudition of Vivekananda had conquered her completely. Ten years later, in *My Master as I Saw Him*, she was to write: "I studied his teaching sufficiently to become convinced of its coherence, but never, till I had experiences that authenticated them, did I inwardly cast in my lot with the final justification of the things he had come to say."

On her study table, between her history and science books, Margaret had opened the *Gita* next to the Bible, a life of Buddha next to a life of Christ, and the main *Upanishads*, the books of Indian wisdom of which Mr. Sturdy had lent her the best existing translations. The question has often been raised, whether Margaret Noble was familiar with Indian philosophy before meeting Swami Vivekananda. Eight years previously, she had written an article (published in 1887) entitled "The Christ Child," and signed "Nealus," in which she said: "The happiness of Christ, we laugh at the words. Yet let us bethink ourselves. Is not this the very secret we learn from Him, how to know the crown of thorns, the crown of glory, the unutterable fullness of beatitude in the hungering and thirsting after righteousness? It is impossible, as we watch the sweet story grow, to help thinking of the Old Indian Buddha, who was tempted and tried, yet became the blessed, so many centuries before. We cannot repress the thought of Socrates, as we look at this life's stern loyalty to truth with its winning lowliness and grace. Undoubtedly they are there, Buddha and Socrates, but whether their memories fall athwart the cradle of the Christ, or whether they agree as brethren sprung from the common soul of human genius, who can tell?"

Now, in any case, she plunged into these works like a theological student, assimilating them one by one and writing a series of essays for her own benefit, in order to clarify her individual objections. She exercised considerable caution in her

incursions into the liberalism of the ancient religions of the world—Hinduism and Buddhism—which hewed out a wide path beyond the Jewish concept of redemption (so exclusive in its dogmas), and outdistanced the security of Christianity. Alone at her work, she would sometimes lose heart and feel giddy at the absence of any fixed background. But she recalled the words of the Swami: "Never feel yourself forsaken. Do you know how God dwells in man? He hides Himself like a Hindu lady of noble birth behind a lattice curtain. He is always there, like that lady who sees everything, though no one suspects her presence. . . ." With this real Presence in her, could she admit defeat, even if she still did not know how to perceive It and serve It?

When too many contradictory questions assailed her, she pictured herself as one of those young Calcutta students among whom Swami Vivekananda had often sat at Sri Ramakrishna's feet. Eager for discussion, they used to lay their thoughts before the saint, who welcomed them with a kindly smile and let them speak. But soon he would grow weary of listening, and would withdraw some distance to the banks of the Ganges, from whence he—who knew all things—would silently give them his blessing. Margaret silenced her thoughts after repeating with great humility the injunction, "Pray in any form, for the Lord knows even the footfall of an ant. . . ."

Gradually, however, she felt new sources of power and harmony springing up within her, to impregnate her words and actions. She became aware of her change of attitude, encouraged as she was in her upward march by the conviction that she was passing from an inferior to a superior truth which kept on unfolding itself. The many and varied stages of her journey no longer frightened her—her backslidings, her wrong turnings, her sudden halts, her stumblings. They all played their part in the divine plan, without dimming the brilliance of the beacon light toward which she moved.

These changes within herself found reflection also in her political activity. She discovered a new expression of man's

capacity when he thrusts aside sin and weakness to find again, through a greater or lesser manifestation, the original purity of his soul. She welcomed with open arms those ideas of infinite power. A deep joy radiated from her which expressed itself most clearly in her relations with the Irish groups she frequented. When she spoke from the platform, she imagined the Swami as being in the front row of her audience. Often she paraphrased the ideas she had derived from the Swami's teaching, and transmitted them with all the fervor with which they had been received: "In the political struggle man must grow continually. . . . He has duties toward his wife, his children, his parents. He has others toward his village, his town, his district, and finally his country. But all these selfish interests for which he strives so hard are transcended when he becomes a citizen of humanity as a whole, when he sees God Himself in each man he serves. Such a man can move worlds, when his tiny ego is dead and God has taken its place."

At this time, too, Margaret became involved in a general controversy which centered in her friend Ronald M'Neill's violent opposition to Home Rule. His journalistic attacks did not spare her; and she, in her turn, became a spokesman in her own group and made use of all the connections she had formed in the Sesame Club, many of whose members were in the House of Commons.

It was at this moment—April, 1896—that Swami Vivekananda returned to London. He found Margaret completely transformed: an intrepid woman of full stature, awaiting the opportunity of announcing to him, "Master, I am ready to make a new effort!"

This did not mean, however, that she was ready to give up her independence of thought. Putting into practice, as far as possible, several of the precepts she had learned, she had prepared her line of defense and was ready to meet the Swami with a series of objections by which she hoped this independence would be preserved. Nothing could have given him greater



satisfaction. He knew by personal experience the road along which Margaret was progressing. Had he not himself, over a long period of years, struggled against Sri Ramakrishna, before surrendering to him? Skeptical and arrogant, had he not sought to defeat the saint's arguments? "Lord," he had asked him one day, "have you really seen God?" Emerging from his serene ecstasy, Sri Ramakrishna had replied, "Yes, my son, I *have* seen God. I see Him just as I see you before me. Only I see Him much more intensely. And I can make you see him too."

This burning question which had tortured the Swami now occupied Margaret. But for the moment it was only her intellectual curiosity which sought the Truth, not in mysticism but as a cold penetrating light, a unity which encircled every divine manifestation, a power emanating from Nature and continually shining forth. Swami Vivekananda knew that one day this intellectual attitude would be laid aside, and that Margaret, stripped of her inhibitions and in a spirit of renunciation, would learn to know God Himself in His blessedness. While awaiting this fulfillment he was content to remain for her the personified Truth, on the human plane; the guide through whom she was feeling her way toward the unfailing light.

She followed his teaching assiduously. Four times a week the Swami gathered his followers together and delivered a course of lectures on the Vedantic philosophy with the same intensity as if he had been in India. The intellectual needs of certain of his hearers, and their aggressive rationalism, had led him to point out to them—among the great traditional paths toward liberation—that of knowledge, the yoga of jnana. "The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion," he told them one day, anticipating their objections. "The materialist is right. There is but One. Only he calls that One matter, and I call it God. That is the only difference." He knew how to capture the most abstract ideas, describe the relation between the soul and God, its freedom, its aspirations, its unity with the creative Principle, and then he could suddenly transform this world of the spirit into the world of every day, giving to

the Vedanta he preached an immediate aim, a practical and feasible conception of the relations between the particular and the universal.

Friday was the day set apart for questions. Margaret would submit the Swami each time to a veritable cross-examination which the rest of the audience followed with growing interest. Her clear voice invariably began the bombardment: "Excuse me, Swamiji, but you said that—" and a passionate discussion ensued. All eyes turned automatically toward the second row, away to the right, where Margaret sat. She was always next to an American woman slightly older than herself with whom she had become acquainted. Her name was Josephine MacLeod. Rich, independent, free both in her movements and in her outlook, she had known the Swami for several years and had accompanied him in his journey to England. She had taken a fancy to Margaret and often took her back to Wimbledon in a cab so that they might continue discussing the subjects which interested them. It was the beginning of an intimate friendship which was to last all their lives.

Certainly, everything was not easy in the Swami's teaching! Margaret was to try to express some of its processes later: "At first the goal is far off, outside Nature. . . . This has to be brought near, yet without being degraded or made to degenerate, until, when it has come closer and closer, the God of Heaven becomes the God in Nature, till the God in Nature becomes the God within this temple of the body and the God dwelling in the temple itself becomes the soul of the man. Thus it reaches the last words it can teach, He whom the sages have sought in all places is in our hearts. *So'ham, so'ham*, I am He, I am He."

One of the greatest obstacles in Margaret's ascent was the assimilation of the philosophical theory of *Maya*, in which Swami Vivekananda had been instructing his followers for several weeks. She almost made herself ill over it, until finally she succeeded in formulating it in words familiar to herself: "By *Maya* is thus meant that shimmering, elusive, half-real, half-unreal complexity, in which there is no rest, no satisfaction, no

ultimate certainty, of which we become aware through the senses, and through the mind as dependent on the senses. At the same time, 'and that by which all this is pervaded, know That to be the Lord Himself.' In those two conceptions placed side by side is contained all the Hindu theology."

In this philosophy Margaret perceived all the efforts, mutually subordinated, that she had made up to that time, all the developments she had passed through in her religious experience. A new light shone upon her life, revealing to her all its difficulties and unhopèd-for openings. Apart from any philosophical enlightenment, she now felt the need of discussing with the Swami the extremely personal problems which until now she had never touched upon with him. She confided them to him simply, not expecting him to solve her difficulties but merely to teach her to consider them unselfishly and in no false spirit of "rights" or of possession. It was the first effort she had made to break out of the circle her logic had built around her and get nearer to the pure experience of her soul. Without her suspecting it, Swami Vivekananda had provided her with the means of making rapid progress, and of leaving behind her those pools of darkness in which she had been engulfed.

Another step which she now took was to speak to him of her activities. Here Margaret felt a deep response from the Swami, who was a born social reformer, but whose sensibility was such that he had never been able to adjust his love of his country to his sorrow over the suffering of its masses. In his family circle he had once known poverty and hunger, in the same way as Margaret, who had herself bravely surmounted these obstacles before approaching the more acute problems of the people. When she spoke to him of Wrexham and her life among the miners—experiences about which the Swami was eager to learn—he interpreted that social phase of her life in spiritual terms, on the assumption that the value of the act is just as important in all its details as the result obtained: "The means should be loved and served as if it were the end itself."

Margaret still often missed the point of these philosophical tenets on which Swami Vivekananda was planning his future work in India. Just as he had studied the underlying purpose

of his race, and the means of encouraging its growth from within, so now he attached a value to everything he saw in England. It was in this direction that he guided his new disciple, stimulating her to see her country with a new set of values which would enlarge her vision. In fact, each of them needed the other: the Master needed the disciple he was preparing, and the disciple needed the master in order that all her possibilities might be harmonized.

Their shared enthusiasm for history led them to delve into the great heroic periods of the past, so as to compare them and to draw from them new sources of creative power. Margaret spoke of "nationalism"—she studied Manzoni every week with Octavius Beatty—while Swami Vivekananda spoke of the education of the masses, of the means of "making men." The whole of that India he had seen in his pilgrimages, with all its poverty and degradation over which he had wept, was compressed in that appeal of his, "Study your Motherland!" He had had to come to England and live among that people which he had despised for so long, in order to recognize that the English possessed sterling qualities. "They have found the secret of obedience without servility and combine the greatest possible freedom with respect for law."

Margaret took Swami Vivekananda to the political meetings in which she participated and whose discussions she directed. He was struck by her determination and listened attentively. He felt the purity of her intentions. But was she fully aware of the disinterested value of her mission? "The true glory," he told her, "is reserved not for the man who can throw a bomb but for him who can stand up and say, 'I possess nothing but God.' The man or the woman who can speak with such assertion will be carried forward by a mighty impulse and will lead the country toward a higher ideal by bringing out its most sacred qualities." He counseled prudence and moderation, advised her to reflect longer on any action before giving it a definite form, with the firm intention of protecting her from personal harm. Margaret realized that he was speaking from experience, of himself, Narendranath Dutta, during his boisterous student days, when, between lectures at the university, he had taught in a school in

the Calcutta suburbs and had gathered together, in the courtyard of his house, the young men of the district and had spoken to them of God until, overcome with emotion, they sang sacred hymns until late into the night. He had used all the materials with which she was now working. He could direct her in every circumstance.

When Margaret showed him her school, he wept with joy. Margaret was embarrassed; she spoke warmly of her aims and efforts. "I am still seeking my method," she confessed. "Every day I discover new elements. These children are free, but several of them are slow to develop because I do not know how to neutralize, quickly enough, the complexes which impede them. The child, in itself, is an entire science. . . . Each has a right to complete self-expression. That is the essential condition of development which I offer them . . ."

"Ah, my poor, poor children of India who are abandoned to the blackest ignorance," murmured Swami Vivekananda. "Their lot is so lamentable that they imagine they are born to be oppressed by all those who have money. They have completely lost their individuality. Can you imagine their misery? Even if we could give them free education in every village, the poor children would be forced to work in the fields to earn their living rather than attend school! We have no money and we cannot educate them. The problem seems hopeless, but I am searching for a solution. If the mountain will not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain. If the poor cannot come to school, the school must go to them, to the plough, to the factory, everywhere. . . ."

"Swamiji . . ."

Margaret spoke, looked at him, hesitated, stopped. She was silent for a while, and color rose to her cheeks. The first step was difficult, but it had to be taken; and now, when the Swami's appeal had overwhelmed her, was the time to take it. She recognized those great waves of enthusiasm which swept over him, which were so healthy and beneficial for all the people who worked with him yet which were constantly in conflict with his changing moods and his lack of organizing ability. Already, brief and indeed almost formal as their association had been, she had

been helpful to him, had extricated him from difficult situations. How much more helpful she could be in an association that was closer and more personal, that would be permanent! She knew how to prepare his work for him. She could assist him in a thousand ways. And he knew her very well, too.

She had told him of her personal problems, her dreams and disappointments. Her own life had been shattered. Twice love had come to her, with its beauty and promise, and had gone. She was entirely free now: free to become Swami Vivekananda's right hand, to serve his cause, to unite her life with his.

She had seen several of her school friends marry missionaries, and set out with them to share hard and unremittingly exacting work in Asia or Africa; surely that was right, and natural: like this.

The words came to her after a pause:

"If God wills it, I will come and work with you. Let us unite our efforts. . . ."

There was a long silence before the Swami answered. He understood perfectly the spirit of genuine abnegation that lay behind Margaret's proposal, and he knew that on her lips the proposal was in its rightful place. She had not the slightest suspicion that he had taken monastic vows. He bowed his head, and when he spoke again it was only a few words:

"I am a monk."

No further personal word was spoken. What counted for them both—for Margaret Noble as for the Swami Vivekananda—was the service of God through the service of the poor; she, too, wished to love God, to do His work, to sacrifice herself to Him. There was another pause, and then the Swami went on talking, quietly:

"You do not realize what would await you out there. Like the Son of Man who had no stone on which to lay His head, so the *sannyasi*, the wandering monk, lives with no roof over him, always on the move under the torrid sun. But a day will come, I believe, when they will go in groups into the villages, and when evening falls and the peasants return from their long labors in the fields, they will sit among them and speak to them. They will bring them not only religion, but also education in

the Western sense. They will speak to them of India; with the help of magic lanterns they will instruct them in astronomy and history; they will show them how other people live. They will show them maps of the world, and atlases. We shall impart ideas of morality to the people, and the hope of self-development. There our mission ends. It is for them, themselves, to do the rest."

In the summer, the Swami spent three months in Europe with a few of his disciples; and Margaret, in London, thought a great deal about this conversation. When he returned in October, it was with the promise of several dedicated followers to go to work with him in India. Captain and Mrs. Sevier, who had been in Switzerland with him, were the first to decide to go: in the high Alps they had felt and shared his vision of a monastery in the Kumaon mountains in the Himalayas, where disciples from both East and West would work and meditate together in the bonds of a common discipline. Henrietta Muller was one of them. All the little group placed their lives at the disposal of their guru; and Margaret was tempted to do the same.

But she felt now that she could not see so far into the future, and she was entirely absorbed in the Swami's immediate work, feeling that every minute's contact with his mind and spirit was part of her education. She had become his private secretary. She watched him undertake a score of tasks at the same time and yet keep track of them all. She watched him pouring out waves of spirituality, arousing currents of irresistible sympathy for India. Besides his lectures, courses of study, and meetings, he was preparing a large-scale study of the three aspects of the Vedantic philosophy, and was finishing his masterly book on Raja-Yoga, the first edition of which sold out in less than a month. Energetic and tireless, he allowed nothing to interrupt his work. Exacting and meticulous in his relations with all his fellow workers, he worshiped the memory of his master, Sri Ramakrishna, with passionate humility. "All that I shall ever accomplish is but dust before his glory," he said. "In him is the source of a new life, for all humanity."

Swami Vivekananda won brilliant success everywhere; he fought like a real kshatriya-warrior—to which caste he belonged. One word was engraved on his shield: "non-attachment"; one motto was seen on his banner: "Thou hast the right to work but not to the fruits thereof." Margaret responded anew to his spell, inspired by this man who radiated power and instilled it into all those with whom he came in contact.

One evening, after a particularly brilliant meeting, the Swami suddenly turned to her during the conversation and said, "I have been making plans for educating the women of my country. I think you could be of great help to me. . . ." But immediately this personal invitation faded into the background of the general conversation. It was the first time he had spoken of his countrywomen, of a dream he had cherished from the time he had lost a favorite sister. The grief he had felt at the sight of her dreary life had made him realize what had to be done for women. He continued: "Thousands of Indian women are waiting, and will lift their heads when a woman from the West comes to fight with them, live with them, and show them the way. In her seclusion the Hindu woman, thought only to have the soul of a child, possesses the inestimable treasure of a valiant faith and an ever-renewed energy. It is thanks to her life of patience and resignation, and to her power of fighting for an ideal, that the fire of honor burns bright within her. Many workers, both men and women, will be needed to respond to the call of the country when the wave of love for Sri Ramakrishna penetrates the cottages, the prisons, the mountains, the populous cities."

Margaret listened to the "call" with deep emotion. Yet she felt numb, incapable of responding. And suddenly she was seized with an indescribable anguish, a twinge of intense moral and physical pain, as if the bonds that held her to family and friends had snapped. Along with this came an unbearable sense of lassitude which prevented any show of enthusiasm. A cloud of details rose up before her, obscuring the vision of her desire. She could not speak, because sobs rose up and choked her.

This feeling of incoherence lasted several weeks, and then there came a sudden breach in the wall of obscurity by which she was surrounded. To follow the Swami? Yes, that was what she



wanted: to live by his side, to help him, to do his work. . . . But, at the same time, she was afraid of that objective conception of the world which, according to him, was the essential condition for useful labor. Several times, when she had visited welfare institutions with him in the London suburbs, she had noticed that he only perceived the intrinsic merit of any action without giving his approval, and without attaching any importance either to the results that were obtained or to the consequences that might ensue. This was a criterion which left her a little baffled; and under it everything that she had accomplished so far—even her welfare work—seemed to crumble away. In the performance of a Christian act—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, nursing the sick—does not the receiver always remain attached to the giver by some bond whether of gratitude or bitterness, by some feeling whether of joy or revolt? But the success or failure by which she was thrilled or disappointed remained the very things that the Swami esteemed least. He lived apart from that relation which exists between the individual and his actions, and he knew how to give without expecting or demanding anything in return.

Considered from the point of view of disinterested activity, in the way the Swami analyzed it, the sacrifice that Margaret wished to make of her life had no value; since, he said, "When we help the world, it is really ourselves we are helping." Margaret was well aware that she was on the wrong track. In her uncertainty, she had concentrated on a single idea—to serve him. For her that meant complete self-effacement, and she had embraced this idea with all the Christian abnegation that could be desired, and with a burning sincerity.

But it was just this that Swami Vivekananda would not accept. He had no use for a disciple who mutilated her mental powers and contracted her own personality. What he needed was a woman, radiating with infinite freedom, who had developed her talents to the limit of their capacity, who had amassed gifts which could be used later like helpful tools.

The day Margaret finally understood what the Swami expected of her marked the decisive moment of her life. But the struggle to reach this understanding had been so difficult that

she felt incapable of speaking directly to the Swami on the matter. She asked Henrietta Muller to speak for her. One evening when the monk and Margaret were both guests at her house, Henrietta announced the news—Margaret offered her life to the Swami to collaborate with him in his work.

Swami Vivekananda showed no surprise. He replied by speaking of himself: "For my own part, I will be incarnated two hundred times, if that is necessary, to do this work among my people that I have undertaken."

The same evening he told Margaret as they parted, "Yes, in India . . . that is where you belong. But only when you are ready. . . ."

That was in November, 1896.

## 7. *Toward the East*

WHEN, A month later, Swami Vivekananda left for India, everyone expected Margaret to be one of the small group of disciples who embarked with him. But a full year of mature reflection was to pass before she took that step.

The last weeks had been hectic, with the Swami's lectures following one another in quick succession. Some innate force moved him to fling forth the truths that were so clear to him, as if he had to sum up all his philosophy before taking his leave. He seemed tense and tired, and like a schoolboy he was counting the days to his departure, yet he continued to give the best of himself. In this outpouring he accepted no authority as final—since every commentator had always interpreted texts according to his own point of view—but in his vision of the future he seized upon the logical bases underlying Hinduism so as to compare them boldly with science (the two being identical), beyond all known limits and beyond the redoubtable enemy, theology.

After one of his lectures, Goodwin, his English disciple and private stenographer, noted: "The personal God is irrational by itself, but regarded, as in the Vedanta, as the highest conception of the Impersonal it becomes not only rational but a logical necessity." He also wrote to Miss MacLeod, who had gone back to New York: "Swami has evolved a new plan, his lectures are better than ever. He speaks undiluted roaring Vedanta." And Margaret absorbed the message from the Swami which was addressed especially to her: "Vedanta is one with

science in looking for the explanation of Nature from within, and rejecting an external cause as in a dualistic religion or theology. Nature must be explained by and from Nature." To his disciples, every one of the last hours spent with the Swami Vivekananda opened up unexpected vistas. But having transported them on the wings of his own flight, he would fall back as if broken and exhausted.

It was with a deep sense of responsibility that Margaret weighed the idea which had been presented to her, and in which the courage that stamped all her character found its echo. Six months before, from Switzerland, the Swami had written to her:

My ideal can be put into a few words, and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.

This world is in chains of superstition. I pity the oppressed, whether man or woman, and I pity the oppressors. One idea that I see clear as daylight is that misery is caused by ignorance and nothing else. Who will give the world light? Sacrifice in the past has been the law; it will be, alas, for ages to come. The earth's bravest and best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all. Buddhas by hundreds are necessary, with eternal love and pity.

Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like a thunderbolt.

It is no superstition with you, I am sure; you have the making in you of a world-mover, and others will also come. Bold words and bolder deeds are what we want. Awake, awake, great one! Let us call and call till the sleeping gods awake, till the God within answers to the call. What more is in life? What greater work? The details come to me as I go. I never make plans. Plans grow and work themselves. I only say, awake, awake!"

A deep depression settled upon the Swami's friends when he had gone. Margaret and Mr. Sturdy had to summon all their energy to maintain cohesion and regularity among the group

until their despondency had lifted; the wave of interest in the spiritual life had suddenly died down. The disciples were not left, however, without help and inspiration. Swami Vivekananda had agreed to invite one of his brothers, Swami Abhedananda—who like himself had sat at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna—to replace him in London. This monk took up his residence in Wimbledon, with one of Margaret's friends. Swami Vivekananda hoped to return to London at the end of six months.

Twice a week now, under Swami Abhedananda, the friends of India gathered for collective meditation and the study of Sanskrit hymns. But it was only when the news came of Swami Vivekananda's arrival in India that these meetings became really successful. Contact had at last been re-established. They followed every detail of his triumphal march toward Calcutta, where he had arrived in time to celebrate with his fellow monks the anniversary of his guru. Madras had received him with the music of cymbals and drums, scattered palms at his feet. His procession had passed beneath triumphal arches amid fumes of incense. Calcutta had received him with fervid addresses of welcome to which he had replied, enthraling his hearers with that message of universal Truth which he had expounded in the West.

Swami Vivekananda had immediately harnessed this surge of good will and enthusiasm, to convert it into action. The most urgent task was to provide a permanent refuge for his fellow monks, whom sheer poverty had scattered all over the country. Some worked independently around Calcutta, others traveled the roads from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, going from temple to temple to accomplish their discipline of purification. Swami Vivekananda dreamed of founding for them a monastery which would later become a university, where, in seclusion, a band of novices would acquire knowledge of and initiation to spiritual life and learn how to associate the secret of contemplating with that of action in modern life.

These plans had already been discussed in London with his English friend Mr. Sturdy, who after consulting those disciples who were nearest to the monk had given him a sum which doubled that brought in by the lectures. The Swami had with

him £4,000 and the promise of help from several American ladies, who were his disciples, in buying the land for the future monastery as soon as he had chosen the site. But, while he accepted this foreign aid which provided a good start, the Swami wanted his Hindu work to begin modestly with the pies and annas of the poorest Indians. In this way well-wishers from East and West, working together under the inspiration of Sri Ramakrishna's spirit, would be linked.

The nucleus of this monastery had actually been in existence for ten years in the dilapidated house of Baranagore where the monks had gathered after the death of Sri Ramakrishna. With shaven heads, and clad in the ochre yellow of renunciation, they had accepted the authority of Swami Vivekananda, whom they recognized as their leader and superior. In a passionate collective wish to meditate, to tell their beads, to chant sacred songs, to dance in ecstasy at the name of Sri Ramakrishna, they had known days of intense exaltation, during which life and death were themselves only paltry obstacles to the divine felicity. Swami Vivekananda had trained them by means of numerous spiritual disciplines, and had made them immerse themselves in the lives of the Great Teachers. The example of Buddha Bodhisattva had intensified their thirst for monastic life, that of Jesus their renunciation—as on the day they had taken their final vows—and those of Rama-Sita and Radha-Krishna the ecstasy of their union with the spirit of their guru. Then another period had followed, during which the monks had all been more or less seized by the obsession of solitary pilgrimage, the impulse to move on to the life of the wanderer. Only a few had stayed behind to guard the relics of Sri Ramakrishna.

When Swami Vivekananda returned to India he re-formed the group of monks, and introduced to them those new disciples who had come from the West to work with them. This was a first step in breaking down the orthodoxy which he sought to overcome, and in transforming the egoism of the monks' spiritual searching and asceticism into a broader ideal of service to others. He succeeded because he came from triumph in the West, with the audacious scheme of uniting what had always been separated by caste laws and social obligations, and which

now had to be reconciled and brought together in the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna.

This work, begun and carried out among a small group of devoted disciples, soon passed beyond those frontiers and found response among the faithful laymen and friends of the Swami who met at Bagh Bazar, a Hindu district in North Calcutta, in a large house owned by Balarum Babu. To establish the work on a permanent foundation, support was necessary, but it was not easy to obtain; these ambitious projects were like building a new house after an earthquake. But he gave himself up to it without sparing his own strength. Early in May, 1897, he wrote to Margaret:

. . . No doubt, especially when one has worked toward an ideal during a whole lifetime, and just when there is a bit of hope of seeing it partially accomplished, there comes a tremendous thwarting blow. I do not care for the disease, but that my ideals have not yet had the least opportunity of being worked out. And you know the difficulty is money. The Hindus are making processions and all that, but they cannot give money. The only help I got in the world was in England. I thought there that a thousand pounds was sufficient to start at least the principal centre in Calcutta, but my calculation was from the experience of Calcutta ten or twelve years ago. Since then, prices have gone up three or four times. The work has been started anyhow. A rickety little old house has been rented for six or seven shillings, where about twenty-four young men are being trained.

When Margaret received this letter she cried out, "God be praised, the Math (monastery) exists!" She trumpeted forth the news, and became at once the regular correspondent between the new organization and the Western disciples who were trying to understand its spirit. This association, which was to be called Ramakrishna Mission, had two important aspects. The first was that absolute obedience which Swami Vivekananda required from his monks, in order to insure their sacrifice of self and their indifferent abnegation of personal and individual interests. The second was the problem of how to co-ordinate monks and laymen. The Ramakrishna Mission was to revive for them, in

the twentieth century, the heroic struggles of Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Catherine of Siena, their efforts to preach the love of God, and their patience in knocking at the doors of the rich and powerful in search of assistance. The monks and their helpers were also to open schools and dispensaries, and to work for the education of the ignorant masses.

In the monastery archives there is a touching manuscript in existence: an unbound exercise book in which a monk copied out the first official reports which were sent to Margaret so that she might read them to the London disciples. The monks' existence was described in the greatest detail, with the manner in which they were led to a complete self-mastery before being sent out into the world.

Margaret studied their rule of life, established a parallel between her life and that of the novices. She drew from this exercise a salutary training for concentrating her vagabond thoughts, and tried to conform mentally to it. Their timetable seemed to have been most judiciously drawn up. They rose at dawn and had several hours' meditation before work. Certain monks celebrated the *pūjas*, or services of adoration, during the morning. The midday meal and a two-hour siesta divided the day, which was then continued in study. In the evening a *pandit* (a Sanskrit scholar) taught the *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, and the Bible to the assembled monks. "If studies in logic and practical work were to be substituted for mystical researches," she thought, "this rule of life might well be mine." In this organization, in which Swami Vivekananda was the guiding hand, in which through his stimulation timid aspirations became passionate achievements in self-sacrifice, Margaret clearly saw her place. "If I go to India, a simple sentence will be added to the next report of the Monastery—a school for girls has been opened." This thought made her intensely happy.

The letters she exchanged with the Swami concerned the work of both. She spoke to him at length of the London disciples. Confused by the dogmatic anthropomorphism of the divine paternity and by the objections to the last finality, believers and rationalists found in Vedanta a clear path where the intelligence was confronted by the idea of the One which has no second.



Blessed peace! It was that which provided a justification and a logical sanction for the previous experiences of each and for the unreasoned efforts to understand the Swami's appeal: "*So'ham, so'ham. I am He.*" They had heard words they had always known but had never spoken.

On the other hand, Swami Vivekananda wrote to her from Almora, on the 20th of June, 1897:

... Let me tell you plainly. Every word you write I value, and every letter is welcome a hundred times. Write whenever you have a mind and opportunity, and whatever you like, knowing that nothing will be interpreted, nothing unappreciated. I have not had any news of the work for so long. Can you tell me anything? I do not expect any help from India, in spite of all the jubilating over me. They are so poor.

But I have started to work in the fashion in which I myself was trained—that is to say, under the trees, keeping body and soul together anyhow. The plan has also changed a little. I have sent some of my boys to work in the famine district. It has acted like a miracle. I find, as I always thought, that it is through the heart, and that alone, that the world can be reached. The present plan is, therefore, to train numbers of young men from the highest classes not the lowest. For the latter I shall have to wait a little, and the first attack will be made by sending a number of them over a district. When these sappers and miners of religion have cleared the way, there will then be time enough to put in theory and philosophy.

A number of boys are already in training, but the recent earthquake has destroyed the poor shelter we had to work in, which was only rented anyway. Never mind. The work must be done without shelter, and under difficulties. . . . As yet it is shaven heads, rags and casual meals. This must change, however, and will, for are we not working for it, head and heart?

It is true in one way that the people here have so little to give up—yet renunciation is in our blood. One of my boys in training has been an executive engineer, in charge of a

district. That means a very big position here. He gave it up like a straw!

An invigorating message was conveyed in the letter Swami Vivekananda wrote on the 4th of July: "For the first time since the days of Buddha, brahman boys are found nursing by the bedsides of cholera-stricken pariahs."

The long earlier letter, meanwhile, was not an appeal; but Margaret and the London disciples felt compelled to collaborate in the heroic work. On her own initiative Margaret opened a first subscription. In the London newspapers she wrote:

"A religious order, unique of its kind, grouping together Christians, Mohammedans, and Hindus, has created a phenomenon of charity which is without equal since the days of Buddha. Give generously. Ten thousand human beings have been saved from famine in a month. A handful of rice can snatch a man from death. Our aid is necessary!" She was always a social worker as well as teacher, serving both needs. . . .

"You can do more work for us from England than by coming here," the Swami wrote to her later in July. "Lord bless you for your great self-sacrifice for the poor Indians!"

It was clear, from this sentence, that Swami Vivekananda accepted her gift of money but still discouraged her increasing desire to go to India. At last she wrote a message that was sent to him indirectly:

"Tell me frankly and candidly whether I shall be of use in India. I want to go. I want India to teach me how to fulfill myself."

These concluding words were the magic touch, the expression of a new stage of development. Margaret wanted, at last, to receive and not to give, to learn and not to teach. The missionary born in her forgot her unavowed arrogance; the religious attitude inherited from her family was no longer a stumbling block. Swami Vivekananda had saved her from herself. He wrote to her immediately:

A letter from S. reached me yesterday, informing me that you are determined to come to India and see things with your own eyes. . . . Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India.

What was wanted was not a man but a woman: a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women especially.

India cannot yet produce great women, she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood, make you just the woman wanted.

Yet the difficulties are many. You cannot form any idea of the misery, the superstition, and the slavery that are here. You will be in the midst of a mass of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of castes and isolation, shunning the white skin through fear or hatred and hated by them intensely. On the other hand, you will be looked upon by the white as a crank and every one of your movements will be watched with suspicion.

The climate is fearfully hot, our winter in most places being like your summer, and in the south it is always blazing. Not one European comfort is to be had in places out of the cities. If in spite of all this you dare venture into the work, you are welcome, a hundred times welcome. As for me, I am nobody here as elsewhere, but what little influence I have, shall be devoted to your service.

You must think well before you plunge in, and after work, if you fail in this or get disgusted, on my part I promise you I will stand by you unto death whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta or remain in it. "The tusks of the elephant come out but never go back!" So are the words of a man never retracted. I promise you that. Again I must give you a bit of a warning. You must stand on your own feet and not be under the wing of . . . or anybody else.

This letter, which was written at the end of July, 1897, acted on Margaret like a whip. She decided at once upon her departure, though for the time she kept it a secret. During the months that followed she continued, in her correspondence, to examine minutely the mental attitude in which the Swami worked, so that she might model herself on him. He answered all her questions fully, providing her with a theoretical training for the task he expected her to fulfill.

Some people [he wrote on the first of October] do the best work when led. Not everyone is born to lead. The best leader, however, is one who "leads like the baby." The baby, though apparently depending on everyone, is the king of the household. At least, to my thinking that is the secret. . . . Many feel, but only a few can express. It is the power of expressing one's love and appreciation and sympathy for others, that enables one person to succeed better in spreading the idea than others. . . .

The great difficulty is this: I see persons giving me almost the whole of their love. But I must not give any one the whole of mine in return, for that day the work would be ruined. Yet there are some who will look for such a return, not having the breadth of the impersonal view. It is absolutely necessary to the work that I should have the enthusiastic love of as many as possible while I myself remain entirely impersonal. Otherwise jealousy and quarrels would break up everything. A leader must be impersonal. I am sure you understand this. I do not mean one should be a brute, making use of the devotion of others for his own ends, and laughing in his sleeve meanwhile. What I mean is what I am, intensely personal in my love, but having the power to pluck out my own heart with my own hand, if it becomes necessary, "for the good of many, for the welfare of many," as Buddha said. Madness of love and yet in it no bondage. Matter changed into spirit by the force of love. Nay, that is the gist of our Vedanta. There is but One, seen by the ignorant as matter, by the wise as God. And the history of civilization is the progressive reading of spirit into matter. The ignorant sees the person in the non-person. The sage sees the non-person in the person. Through pain and pleasure, joy and sorrow, this is the one lesson we are learning. . . . Too much sentiment hurts work. "Hard as steel and soft as a flower" is the motto.

Margaret pondered long over this letter. The only teaching the Swami could not give her was how to emerge from her past life. To advance toward freedom, she had to cut free from all that was still keeping her back, without assimilating "what was

before her" with any of the elements of "what was behind her," without seeking in the gift of herself any echo of her disillusion as a woman. The Swami had made her wait until she desired the sacrifice of her life as a source of new happiness.

The only painful moment was when Margaret spoke to her mother. But her mother knew already. She had understood long before that Margaret had transcended her milieu and was preparing to accomplish God's great task. With open hands, repeating often the prayer made thirty years before, she accepted the sacrifice. She had said, "Lord, if it be Thy will, I dedicate my child to Thee. . . ." Now she added, "Lord, we are in Thy hands, both she and I. . . ." But she hid these things in her heart because they formed the secret of her peaceful renunciation.

Margaret needed several months more to organize her departure, to fulfill the conditions required by Sri Ramakrishna of his faithful disciples—that is, the carrying out of all their obligations toward the world and their families before giving themselves to God and to spiritual life. With Margaret going, the family was losing its head, its main support. The two sisters and Richmond, who was now twenty, discussed at length their plans for the future. Margaret's work at the Ruskin School was in full development and had many pupils, and she handed this work over to May.

Her friends thought that she was merely setting out on a study tour, and were not at all surprised. Only Mr. Sturdy knew that she was taking up a new life. She had had long conversations with him, and the state of absorption in which she lived was so great that he urged her to go. She also confided in her friend Nell Hammond, and in a long farewell talk in the latter's cosy little house in Park Road she asked Nell to look after May, and also after Octavius Beatty, the friend of eight years' standing. She emphasized the latter request in a letter in January: "I want you to make him one of your special friends. I have always felt that he was a little out of it with you! And I do want you to see the fine side of him. Read Mazzini and take him as a commentary. In that way you will see how good he really is, and

how tender and sympathetic to all the weak and oppressed, and all his burning passion for humanity."

Octavius himself rebelled against Margaret's departure. He listened to her reasons, then began to stride up and down in front of the fireplace. He took out his pipe and lighted it with deliberate movements. Then, sitting down by Margaret's side, he remained a full hour looking at the fire crackling on the hearth, before he said, sadly, "I'll come to the docks to see you off."

On the day she left, a cold rain was falling, lashing the windows of the cab that took her to Tilbury. Everyone was shivering with emotion. Mother, sister, brother, Octavius Beatty, and Ebenezer Cook waited on the quay until the ship disappeared in the fog. For a long time they could see Margaret standing on the deck, hatless, her face crowned with her golden hair. She was strangely beautiful and serene: no longer belonging to them, but blessing them with infinite love; already her gray eyes were seeking the far-off light toward which she moved.

In her hand she held the letter in which Swami Vivekananda had written: "*The tusks of the elephant come out but never go back*"; so are the words of a man never retracted. I promise you I will stand by you unto death.



*Part Two*

*The Guru*





## 8. *Early Impressions*

BELUR is a village on the Ganges, five miles south of Calcutta, at a spot where the river is more than a mile wide. Here, in a dilapidated house on a fifteen-acre estate, Swami Vivekananda was preparing to establish the main center of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission. From the site, opposite the Baranagor landing stairs, Calcutta could be seen in the distance, while to the south, behind a curtain of palms, rose the golden domes of the Kali temple in the Dakshinesvar garden, where Sri Ramakrishna had lived.

The place was bought with the help of Henrietta Muller, and now the Swami was going back and forth between the house of Balaran Babu and Belur, superintending the necessary reconstructions. The main building, the walls of which had been rotting with damp, was repaired, and a new floor was added, with several rooms opening on a veranda which overlooked the river. The small building which had been the guest house was also put in livable condition; and this had to be done in a hurry, for two more American women had announced their immediate arrival: Miss MacLeod, and the widow of the famous Norwegian violinist, Ole Bull. The house, as completed for their dwelling, was extremely simple: a bungalow with several connecting rooms, sparsely furnished; barred windows with no panes; and a veranda covered with a wide awning that let in a subdued light. In addition to restoring the buildings, the Swami had the miserable stairs—its steps down to the water quite worn out—rebuilt; and on each side there was a stone pillar with a light,

to serve as guide for boatmen. Any rainfall, however, turned the site of the Mission into a sea of mud.

Sarah Thorp Bull was the daughter of an American Senator; she was a Roman Catholic, forty-eight years old, an accomplished musician who at the age of twenty had married the Norwegian virtuoso, forty years older than herself. She had now been a widow, rich and independent, for eighteen years, and for the past four years she, with Josephine MacLeod, had been working in fervent collaboration with Swami Vivekananda, and longing to come to India. During the Swami's first American tour the two women had made plans to visit their instructor's country, but he had tried to dissuade them. "Come by all means if you want to see poverty, degradation, filth, and men in rags who speak of God and who live only for God. But if you seek anything else, don't come," he said, and added, "We cannot bear one more word of criticism!" Now, four years later, he had himself invited them to come to India. They hurried to Belur in order to supervise work at the monastery from the very beginning. Their stay there was a consecration of their fidelity.

The two women, who arrived at the beginning of February, organized their life so as to be almost completely isolated from the world. Swami Vivekananda, who lived with his brother monks in a house about three-quarters of a mile away, came every morning at sunrise to spend an hour or two instructing them. One morning he said:

"Do you remember that Irish girl who came to the talks? She is here to devote her life!"

"Oh, Swamiji, do let her come and live with us!" they both cried. "Can she?"

The Swami reflected for a moment. Margaret was now in Calcutta studying, making her first adjustment to India. He had wanted her to live with his mother, in whose household she would have been plunged without delay into Hindu family life; but the old lady had gone to Darjeeling, in the mountains, and that plan could not be carried out now. In these circumstances the suggestion of his disciples seemed good, and he accepted it. Miss MacLeod at once sent a servant to Calcutta with the invitation; and Margaret arrived the next day. Her face was dis-

figured by mosquito bites, but her eyes were sparkling with joy. She was radiant, triumphant.

She was excited, too, over seeing Miss MacLeod again; and the latter, cordial and hospitable by nature, was delighted to introduce the Irish disciple to Sarah Bull, whom her intimate friends called Dhiramata, and who was clearly a personality. Still very beautiful, calm and self-possessed, she owed her special charm to her lively and precise intelligence, and to the persuasive self-assurance that never left her. All her life she had dictated to circumstances, and although she was always gentle she could not conceal her authoritative manner, even in her dealings with Swami Vivekananda, whom she acknowledged as her spiritual guide. It had to be admitted that the Swami was not wholly competent to deal with material matters, and Dhiramata lectured him as if he were her son. "Let me be a mother to you in temporal things," she said. "You are still a child, incapable of understanding a simple addition!"

Margaret's arrival made the group of seven Western disciples in India complete, the others being Henrietta Muller and Captain and Mrs. Sevier. (Goodwin was in Madras at this time; he died four months later at Octacamund.) To celebrate this reunion the Swami invited them all, with other of his followers for an open air gathering at Belur. It was one of those intimate occasions on which his *savoir faire* persuaded him to gather the most orthodox of monks to meet with the foreign disciples, and to set up a warm current of sympathy through the discussion of the projects that interested them all.

"Yesterday we picnicked as his guests on a lovely bit of river bank," Margaret wrote to Nell Hammond. "It was just like a bit of Wimbledon Common until you looked at the plants in detail. Then you found yourself under, not silver birches and nut trees and oaks, but acacia and mangoes in full blossom, with here and there a palm in front of you—and magnificent blossoming creepers and cable-like stems instead of bracken and bluebells underneath."

This letter to her friend in London was not wholly taken up, however, with an outing in the Indian countryside! The Swami was drawing up his plans, and talked of them more every

day. Mrs. Bull had offered to finance the future monastery and to have the projected temple built.\* Margaret, who had promised a detailed report to the London disciples, went on in her letter to try to sum up the day's conversations:

Now, as to the work here, the Swami's great care is the establishment of a monastic college for the training of young men for the work of education—not only in India but also in the West. This is the point that I think we have always missed. I am sure you agree with me as to the value of the light that Vedanta throws on all religious life. What one does not realize is that this light has been in the conscious possession of one caste here for at least three thousand years, and that instead of giving and spreading it they have jealously excluded not only the gentiles but even the low castes of their own race! This is the reform Swami Vivekananda is preaching, and this is why we in England must form a source of material supplies. With the educational definition of the aim you are sufficiently familiar. You also know well enough that the spread of the devotion to Sri Ramakrishna is another way of defining the object which would better appeal to certain minds.

But every precaution had to be taken lest the broad-minded teaching of the Swami should be considered as the beginning of a new sect, with all its dogmas and limitations. He had been recognized in London as a "Master" because of his power of perceiving an abiding peace beyond all understanding, that belonged to all without distinction of sect. In the West he had given understanding; now he had to offer the counterpart from India. Himself an ascetic, he was at the same time an agnostic and a monk.

But Margaret wrote now with difficulty. The point of view of the monk, expounded in a country whose background she did not fully comprehend, went so far beyond her vision that she had to correct herself several times to avoid distorting what she had heard. Going on with her report for the London group, in the letter to her friend, she wrote:

\* The present grand temple, designed by Swami Vivekananda and built after the centenary Ramakrishna celebrations in 1936, was the gift of two other American disciples.

To begin with, that bogey of ours—sectarianism. You have always said, in full agreement, “Do let us avoid making a new sect,” and so I have felt. I hate being labeled or labelable. But I have now had time to consider the case quietly and alone, and I have come to the conclusion that a sect is a group of people carefully enclosed and guarded from contact with other, equal groups. It is the antagonism to others that constitutes a sect, not union. Therefore if members of various sects, without abandoning their own existing associations, choose to form a group for the special study of a certain subject or the special support of a given creed or movement it is surely no more a religious sect than the Folklore Society or the Society for the Protection of Hospital Patients or the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. At the same time, the clear definition of such a group enables it to conserve the co-operative power of the members instead of dissipating it, gives them area for appeal and so on. Don’t you agree? Now that I have got the bearings of the thing like this, the word “sect” seems to me a mere bogey, and our terror of a new one just as great a weakness as any other fear, say of Russians or scarlet fever. . . .

There is another side again. This movement is no less than the consolidation of the Empire along spiritual lines. Mrs. Bull declares that the Theosophical Society is the stalking-horse of the Russian Government. It is certain that members of the Theosophical Society have in the recent crisis been inviting the people to sedition and mutiny against us. On the contrary not only has the new Hinduism found its firm foothold in the United States and in London, but everyone who has joined it actively is passionately loyal to England. When Swami Vivekananda is in India, at least as regards the Hindu section of the community, there will be no sedition or the shadow of it. I do think, don’t you, that the thing is broad enough to appeal to other sections in England outside the missionary-senders, and when we begin the women’s side, all women leaders ought to be in sympathy! This work promised immeasurable joys.

## 9. *The First Steps*

FOR THE three women—fellow devotees and friends—who were now living together in the little guesthouse at Belur, the most profitable hours of the day were those when the Swami Vivekananda visited them. Usually he came alone, but he was sometimes accompanied by a group of young novices. These two months of teaching (February and March, 1898) unleashed a storm of emotion upon all his followers.

His presence transformed the cottage. The women would sit around him, the novices at his feet. He poured out his soul to them and would have won over a heart of stone. Was he not a lover of India, loving it in its essence without even looking at it, with the instinct of the tree attached to the earth by its roots? He extolled the religious emotion of his people, and called upon his disciples and friends to work closely with him, in order to spur the Indians to action and make them realize their latent abilities. On all sides he was creating the India of the future. His message could be summed up in these words: "The worship and service of humanity are the only prayer in which the worshiper, the worship, and the Worshipped are One. . . . We must have the faith to be real patriots! The heart shudders before the thousands of creatures who are dying of hunger, who live in ignorance. Let each one understand that he is divine! Let each learn and know it. Let us awake! Let us arise and tell them! To work!"

He knew well that he was being watched on all sides. With

a handful of monks eager to sacrifice themselves, who were one with him as he had been one with Sri Ramakrishna, his beloved master, he was making a superhuman effort. He had succeeded in transforming their sentimentality and their religious intensity into a quality of living achievement in which different dogmas, apparently contradictory, sustained a growing enthusiasm. He imposed unorthodox rules on the fellow workers who marched under his leadership. He went so far as to tell them. "Let the *Vedas*, the *Koran*, the *Puranas*, and all scriptural lumber rest for some time, let there be worship of the visible God of Love and Kindness in the country. All idea of separation is bondage, that of non-differentiation is liberation. Let us admit boys of all religions among us—Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian, or anything—but not too abruptly. The only thing you will have to do is to make separate arrangements for their food, and to teach them that they may be moral, manly, and devoted to doing good to others. This indeed is religion."

The Swami tolerated no criticism, and his strong personality reached out beyond the framework he was setting up. If, on the one hand, he knew that his consecrated Western disciples were to be submitted to all the indignities of isolation which outcasts were made to undergo (since all foreigners are outcastes, or *mleccha*, in India), on the other hand he granted them privileges which were gradually to be recognized, including that of entering the sanctuary of Sri Ramakrishna, and of worshipping there. He invited pariahs to eat with him. Like a poet, he sang of humanity; and, moving without shock of transition from the real to the unreal, he mingled the religious experience of a thousand years with that of every day. "The worship of the Absolute is within the power of any creature, powerful or wretched, brahman, or pariah," he said. "Worship it as it manifests itself. Religion is practical experience, a personal element that has been realized." Margaret was to explain later, "It was as if he knew that the first material of new consciousness must be a succession of vivid, but isolated, experiences, poured out without proper sequences, so as to provoke the mind of the learner to work for its own conception of order and realization."



Swami Vivekananda spoke with a genuine tenderness to the three women, at the same time addressing himself more particularly to Margaret, who had come to work with him among the poor. "Open your hearts wide to receive the treasure of the poor," he said to them all as they sat together. "For them you are God Himself entering their house. Famished, degraded, debased, they will confer on you the supreme good, since they see in you the Perfection to be worshiped. What do you bring them in exchange?"

One day Miss MacLeod asked him, "Swamiji, how can I serve you best?"

"Love India!" he replied, "and serve it. Worship this land which is a prayer crying out toward Heaven."

Swami Vivekananda gave all that it was in his power to give, in order that he might convey the true physiognomy of India. He conducted his disciples through his own personal experience, surrendering himself to the burden of love which Sri Ramakrishna had bequeathed him and living through a thousand internos in his eagerness to serve the poorest. He spoke to them also of his life as a wandering monk: a period in which, frenzied with the love of God, his face and limbs burned with the sun, he no longer felt the dust of the desert or the cold air of the mountains which were breaking his rebellious body.

Some mornings, when the Swami was too tired to come to the cottage, one of the older monks would take his place. The three women would take advantage of these occasions to ask all kinds of questions about Swami Vivekananda's life. Had this monk known him in his youth? Had he accompanied him on his pilgrimages?"

At an appropriate moment Margaret asked, insistently, "Tell us something of Swami's life at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna."

Then the monk described the wonderful existence, full of a radiant light, that had been theirs at Dakshinesvar and Cossipore, where Sri Ramakrishna had died. "We have retained that life," he said, "thanks to Narendra (Swami Vivekananda's

first name). It is he who now incarnates the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna."

For Margaret Noble, the moments of deepest joy were those in which Swami Vivekananda gave her precise and personal instructions. She drank in his words, but when the time came for him to leave she felt an indefinable sorrow. She longed to say to him, "Swamiji—the weeks are passing, and you haven't said a word about the new school for which I came. Why don't you speak about it? I want to start work. . . ." Sometimes she would go back with him along the cactus-lined path, but she could find no way of breaking her impatient silence. The Swami walked along hurriedly. When Margaret succeeded in making an attempt to raise the question he interrupted her, and pointed to the banks of the Ganges, sparkling in the morning light.

"Live in the sun," he said. "Look at what is going on around you. Everything is so beautiful! Don't make any plans. That is not your job."

On some days he would remain entirely absorbed in his thoughts, absolutely inscrutable; and when Margaret left him she was overwhelmed by the uncertainty in which she felt herself floundering. "What am I doing here for so long?" she complained to Miss McLeod. "Why doesn't the Swami speak to me about work?"

With the absence of haste that is characteristic of spiritual leaders, Swami Vivekananda was waiting until the heart of his disciple opened, and she learned by herself the secret of the right attitude to adopt. She did not realize that her will-to-action and her intelligence were standing between her and the broad road which he wanted her to take. Blinded by her desire to succeed, to fulfill her task well, Margaret was incapable, as yet, of understanding the first lesson that India was teaching her: to live in the present moment, to find in the absence of "willing" the secret of disinterested work. The Swami remained silent because any words would have been in vain. She had to discover by herself that her progressive and "go-ahead" educational methods were of little concern to India, and interested

the Swami only a little. If he had summoned her it was because he needed her creative force, her stability and her rectitude, because he knew that she was capable of seeing the ideal behind the goal without worrying about the lack of means at the outset. Plans become integrated, and succeed by themselves, when they are the result of self-renunciation.

Completely sure in his touch, the Swami worked with the object of gradually changing Margaret under the influence of India's symbolic thought. To become a real educator of Hindu women, she must become a Hindu woman herself, even in her most spontaneous reactions. All that a Hindu woman inherited at birth must come to Margaret through acquired knowledge. But how was she to get it? Intellectually she accepted such a discipline, of course; but the Swami wanted more than that. For this reason he would recall, during their morning discussions, the famous women of India's sacred history—Sita, Mirabai, and all their sisters, whose virtues influenced Indian women still. But he deeply mistrusted Margaret's enthusiasms, since they betrayed uncontrolled impulses, and therefore he suggested that she take as a model the quiet and modest attitude of the Hindu woman in the *zenana*—the segregated enclosure which no man outside the family may enter—of her own house. With an actual absorption, in this profound sense, the acquisition of the Hindu woman's mentality would not mean a forced or brusque evolution but a transformation of the mental structure itself, a slow assimilation which had as its object a new conception of values. The keen-minded Western woman, certain of her intelligence, had to learn to reveal herself through masterful immobility, through calm meditation, and through the experience of the soul.

A fierce duel awaited instructor and disciple before this result could be achieved. The Swami sought to disarrange the elements of his pupil's reason, while demanding for this purpose the full resistance of her personality throughout the mental operation. At no moment could the Swami dispense with her intellectual approval, for that had been at the root of the sincerity she had displayed in coming to India; its force undimin-

ished, it now became the basis of her voluntary transformation. It was only on this condition that Swami Vivekananda could provide her with the neutralizing elements necessary for her stability. When he judged her sufficiently well established on a new line of consciousness, he would suddenly decide to uproot her and to lead her wherever he wished her to go, that she might espouse India in all its intimacy.

As a leader who knew all the details of the road to be followed, he sometimes seemed hard, especially when he required from Margaret a complete submission, an abandonment of habit, and a break with former associations. He asked her, for example—during a relatively short period, it is true, but with no half-measures—to accept the living conditions of the most orthodox brahmans, to dress like a poor woman who possessed only one sari, to sleep on the ground, to eat with her fingers, to submit to all the restrictions and limitations imposed upon women in India until she understood their sense and value. Then, later, he gave her the secret of entering into the constructive solitude of the soul, the perfect silence. Several years after this period of learning, Margaret was to watch and fast and pray behind her closed doors, clear-sighted and with an inward happiness the radiation of which many were to enjoy.

The difficult thing to conceive was that Swami Vivekananda modeled Margaret's thought in absolute mental obedience and humility in order to inspire her with total liberty of action. He rejoiced in advance over the initiative she was to show later. He even said to his fellow monks: "Never restrict her liberty. What do *you* know about what I have given her?" On this point he and she achieved an equilibrium of their possibilities. They needed each other to the same extent, with the same intensity. He was to provide her with the necessary powers, and with a full certitude in setting out for her goal; then he was to cut off the present from the past and create for her that terrible phase of isolation where all foundations are lacking. There lay the mystic knot, named in many different ways. It is in the darkness of night that the sacrifice is accomplished, that the spiritual being is awakened to a new life. It grows, enjoys

the blessing of fruitful manna, and would remain in that bliss should not the spiritual master suddenly break every fence of protection. It is like opening its cage to a bird strong enough to possess the sky.

Swami Vivekananda would encourage her every time she trembled or stumbled, saying, "Look before you! How clear and simple everything is in the Light!"

At the beginning, Margaret lost herself in a jungle of conflicting emotions and tried to recall the Swami she had known in London. How different he had become from that grave, measured, delicate personage! Here, she had to deal with an authoritative instructor whose background escaped her, and who possessed a suppleness which made him almost incomprehensible. But how grateful she was to him for having the audacity never to make easy that which was difficult and even repugnant to her! In every effort of spiritual labor her opposition equaled the submission she accepted in advance, and she retained the will power to rely on the first cause and not on the effects. Suddenly Swami Vivekananda would glide from the purest monastic teaching to which he had always bound her to what she would have called crudest "manifestations of superstition"—all with the same nonchalance he observed in his dress. One never knew if he was going to arrive dressed as a lord in silken robes or with his body barely covered with a *gerrua* cloth—the ochre yellow of wandering monks. One thing was certain: as soon as the Swami appeared a wave of love, of real communicative passion, was released to flow over and through all around him.

One night in February, she saw him take part in a curious scene which carried her away by its intensity. It took place when the full moon was up, in front of the house of Naba Gopal Babu, a disciple who was celebrating the dedication of a shrine to Sri Ramakrishna.

All the monks had come by the Ganges in three broad sailing boats lit up by resin torches. As soon as they stepped onto the bank, in the midst of the waiting crowd, they formed a tumultuous procession with drums, cymbals, and gongs. Mar-

garet had seen Swami Vivekananda go by dancing like a madman, completely carried away, intoxicated with love. Around his neck hung garlands of flowers and the drum with which he accompanied a song taken up in the chorus. "Who is that naked child who has come to the hut of the poor brahman? . . ." A frenzy seized upon the gesticulating audience. Fireworks crackled. Drums beat out pulsating, harmonized rhythms for the dancers. As the procession drew up in front of the house, conches wailed into the night. Swami Vivekananda prostrated himself in the dust, smearing his head with ashes, before setting up the image of Sri Ramakrishna with the necessary sacred formulas.

Margaret asked herself, "What is this delirious joy? Is it madness, humility, or love?"

Margaret envied every one of those monks to whom Swami Vivekananda was devoting the greater part of his time. She would have liked to live with them and share their fervor. She knew that every day, for hours, the Swami meditated, sang, and worshiped with his novices, and that from a purely philosophical discussion he led them on without transition to the threshold of ecstasy. The monastery's spiritual life consumed all these men like a flame, and drew forth a moving tongue of spirituality.

While the novice was giving her lessons in Bengali, Margaret found herself watching him, studying his attitude and expressions. Had he not been the father of a family, a man racked with doubt, until the day Swami Vivekananda had opened his eyes and shown him the way of light? He replied with embarrassing frankness to all the questions which Margaret put to him; his soul was limpid as a mountain stream. Sensing his pupil's anxiety, he did all he could to help her. His first piece of advice was not to ask hundreds of difficult and embarrassing questions but to apply herself assiduously to the only task that was required of her at the moment; namely, the learning of Bengali, particularly those everyday words which can win hearts.

By this means she could become a useful instrument in the hands of Swamiji.

The novice's simple advice brought her serenity. She derived benefit, by deduction, from the little he told her. And yet, in the absence of living personal experience, that benefit remained a dead letter. She was well aware that in order to be the spiritual daughter of Swami Vivekananda she had to become one with the monks, but she did not know how to achieve this. Would perfect exterior composure, copied from theirs, help her to find the attitude she was seeking? Margaret tried it. She set about faithfully acquiring the placid demeanor of the novice, and under his guidance she sought to master everything that went on in her mind.

"I have always thought," she was to explain later, "that it was due to this fact that I found myself on the line of communication between his mind and that of our master—as on the path of interaction between some major and minor heliograph—and that I owed by ability thereafter to read and understand a little of those feelings and ideas with which the air about us was charged. . . ."

Why could she not be like her two American friends, who were less exacting, and who lived happily without seeking to weave the experience of the Swami into their own lives Margaret felt as if she were caught in a hand-vice, impelled toward a deep and full self-realization. In the midst of the pure love she felt for the master she had accepted, she was the prey of an increasing fear against which she could not struggle. Where was he leading her? In silence, and with but one discipline—that of total purity—he was teaching her to live by incessantly controlling her sincerity. He asked her to expect nothing from the future and to attach no value to the sacrifice of her life. The present was the only moment that counted; the moment wrapped in silence, the moment which is God Himself, the Intangible, the Omnipresent. . . .

One morning, when Swami Vivekananda was speaking of the authority of the *guru*, who is above father and mother, who is the Friend, the spiritual Instructor, the Master all in all, who

chooses or rejects his disciples, and who knows their most intimate thoughts even in "seed form," Margaret hid her face in her hands and gave way to the tumult of the unescapable questions within her. Was she ready, now, to abandon the integrity of that mental being which masqueraded as her ego? Had she to assume that state of conscious passivity in which the personality is sacrificed in a tacit obedience? Had she to pass that test before she could experience the serene liberty of the monks, who can gambol in the fields like children in the sun, and then immediately continue their meditations in silence? Sri Ramakrishna had been in the fullest that "guru" for all the monks.

She was soon to cross the threshold beyond which the answer to her questions lay.



## 10. "She Who Had Been Dedicated"

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS in Bengal are fixed according to the lunar calendar, and in 1898 the anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated during the last week in February. Swami Vivekananda naturally wished the commemoration to be one of particular brilliance this year, so as to mark worthily the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission and the opening of its center at Belur. According to Hindu custom, such an event is signalized by a sumptuous banquet given to the poor; and the news of it spread like wildfire for miles around.

On the appointed day, thus, hundreds of village folk and poor people—men and women, broods of children—came with their rags and their diseases, their crutches and their wooden bowls, to transform the site of the future monastery into a huge milling *Cour des Miracles*. Enormous brass cauldrons had been set up on cement pedestals for the cooking of rice and curries. A quantity of ewers and tiny earthenware cups (the latter to be dashed to pieces after being used) had been bought. The monks were hard put to it to control the famished hordes who fought and struggled to receive their pittance.

From dawn to dusk musicians played their drums and horns, sheltered under awnings made of bamboo and interlaced palm leaves; and monks led the crowd in singing hymns. Draperies, garlands, growing plants, and lights served as setting for the portrait of Sri Ramakrishna in an open-air shrine, and before it were soon piled up all sorts of offerings: balls of rice, jugs of melted butter, baskets of bananas and vegetables which the

monks carried off to the kitchens. The air was full of the smoke of incense, the smell of burning perfumes, and the sound of voices in fervent incantation as the monks chanted to Sri Ramakrishna by the familiar name they had given him:

"Sri Guru Maharaj, grant us the knowledge of Thy joy! Sri Guru Maharaj, grant us the knowledge of Thy felicity!"

This religious festival, with its popular rejoicing, was a great jubilation and triumph for the crowd. A more intimate celebration had taken place five days earlier, in the course of which Swami Vivekananda had demonstrated the broad scope of the authority he meant to wield. To break once for all the narrow circle of hereditary prerogatives that surrounded him, Swami Vivekananda had raised to the rank of brahmans—the highest caste, whose members alone have the right to occupy themselves with the affairs of God—those children of Sri Ramakrishna who belonged to the two other superior castes, originally warriors and merchants, the kshatriyas and the vaishyas. For him, all the builders of the new India were brothers. Linked by the name of Sri Ramakrishna, they were, in the Hindu phrase, "born a second time" into a faith that escaped from the darkness of narrow orthodoxy; they were purified by the grace of the very name of the saint. "Every Hindu is the brother of all other Hindus," Swami Vivekananda explained. "Let us give up quarreling over the divergencies of doctrines and religions; let us preach the Gospel of Hope and Cheer. We are all brothers, we all have the same rights. All rivers make their way to the ocean; if, as they run downhill, their channels diverge, it is still the same water!"

On that day fifty worshipers, after bathing in the Ganges, prostrated themselves before the shrine of Sri Ramakrishna and received the sacred thread that is the brahmanic emblem. They were initiated into the *mantra* of the *Gayatri*, the prayer of all time: "Let us meditate on the ever-shining Light of the divine Savitri; may it inspire our spirit. . . ."

Although this ceremony was held in private, it constituted a direct and daring attack upon the orthodox teaching of the pandits, and was to provoke lively reactions against the new Order. And on that same day the Swami Vivekananda had also

asserted, on the authority of a long-forgotten line of the *Vedas*, that the supreme ordination could be given to a foreigner as well as to a Hindu. Before this, he had several times raised the question, "Who is an *arya* or a *mleccha*—the man who lives within the shell of his pride, or the man who, over and above race and caste divisions, brings a universal interpretation to the highest truths?"

He was constantly broadening the framework of spiritual concepts. Had he not seen some of his Western friends submitting to the discipline of *vanaprashtha* according to the teaching of the Indian scriptures—that third stage of spiritual life where the father withdraws into the forest, or similar solitude, with his wife, that they may live there together dedicated to God, far from the world and its preoccupations? Had he not seen some of them—Max Muller, Paul Deussen, E. T. Sturdy, and others—bring to India commentaries on the *Rig-Veda*, translations of the *Sutras*, and reasoned arguments, which were of the utmost value? His travels and his contact with foreign cultures had given him all the points of comparison that were necessary in order to put his principles into practice. He showed himself a real leader in this.

It was thus that, a month after the celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's anniversary festival, he granted to his Irish disciple Margaret Noble the first ritual initiation, by which she became, so to speak, a probationer in the Order of Ramakrishna. This was on the morning of the 29th of March, 1898. The Swami blessed her piously, marking her forehead with the very ashes of her offering—ashes which were to become the emblem of her life. He gave her the name of *Nivedita*—"she who had been dedicated." Had God in some mysterious way revealed to him what he never, in any human sense, knew: that Margaret's mother, in the travail of her baby's birth had already "dedicated" to God this child who was today giving herself to Him through the Swami's intermediary? No other name than this of *Nivedita* could have better associated in the same action of grace this dedication of the mature woman and the recognition of sacred vows taken at her birth, thirty-one years before.

She had been, approximately, two months in India.

For Margaret, this extremely short and simple ceremony of her first initiation, which took place in the house of Nilambar Mukerjee where the monks still lived, before her two American friends who acted as witnesses, marked the crucial moment when all she had been, and all she was, became crystallized in an act of total submission to Swami Vivekananda, whom she accepted as her guru. Margaret came forward radiant, conscious of what she was sacrificing—her life itself. It was all that she was capable of, all that she understood. She knew that for the rest she was not yet ready. "Swamiji" was for her the radiant face through which she received light and grace. God spoke to her through the intermediary of this guru; in him the sacred scriptures lived as a knowledge which he communicated tangibly. She would not have dared touch the hem of his yellow robe; for, had she done so, she feared all the demons of her imperfections would rise up in her. But she ventured to look at him, since in his eyes there lay a promise of freedom, the absolute certainty of victory once the shadows were left behind.

This look in his eyes had been the beacon of her hopes during the whole day's complete fast which preceded the ceremony. She spent it in absolute silence. The last hours were difficult, because of her desires which she could not yet subdue, because of the rebellion of her body which no longer obeyed her will, because of the sacred anguish which grew within her as the moment drew nearer and nearer. Was it fear of what was to happen? She did not know. The eyes of her guru gave her life, but did not explain it.

A score of times she had tried to express to herself all that Swami Vivekananda was to ask her and what she was to reply. She could hardly bear to think that neither her body, her feelings or her intelligence would belong to her any more, that her entire being would be delivered over to her guru for him to mold with his hands like a piece of potter's clay. Something in her revolted at the thought of becoming a creature of obedience projected into her guru's command, but she could not do otherwise. She had forgotten that he was also to bring his effort to bear and uphold her until she reached her full stature through him. And, in fact, Swami Vivekananda asked her nothing.

Marked with the ashes, she rose from her prostration with a sense of the full weight of her acceptance, and of her complete ignorance and inability to go forward alone. Everything that was behind her seemed to collapse, while she could see nothing secure ahead. Her eyes sought those of her guru: without him she felt lost.

In the chapel several monks were meditating. A voice was chanting her favorite prayer:

“From the unreal, lead us to the Real;  
From the darkness, lead us to the Light;  
From death, lead us to Immortality;  
O Almighty Mother,  
By Thy sweet pitying face  
Imbue our whole being,  
And always defend us.”

When Swami Vivekananda went out with the three women, the monks showered upon them the *prasad*—the consecrated food—fruits, and sweetmeats which had been prepared for the occasion. The Swami was overcome with joy. He called upon Shiva and Uma—the same powers which inspire all Pioneers of divine life—and in spite of the reserve which was habitual to him in the face of all spiritual emotion, he set aside the whole day for Nivedita. In order to communicate to her, now a gleam of that divine ardor which consumes the whole being in its adoration, he began to sing a hymn he had often sung before Sri Ramakrishna:

“. . . Shiva, Thy ready thunderbolt rules over meadows,  
hills, and sky,  
O God of Gods! O Slayer of Time!  
Thou the great void, the King of Dharma,  
Shiva, Thou Blessed One, redeem me . . .”

His fingers plucked the *tanpura* as he sang. In the manner of the “Shivaite” yogis he had put on a wig, the plaited tresses of which reached to his knees. Bone ornaments hung from his ears, and on his breast that was covered with ashes dangled several rows of beads. With eyes closed, bordering on ecstasy, he sang incantations, which became ardent supplications of love. The monks had seated themselves at his feet, and one of them

kept time with cymbals. There was a full hour of music, thus, before the three women rose to go back to the guesthouse.

Then, just as they were about to leave, the Swami turned to Nivedita. He had swiftly divined the anguish she felt before the great Void he had opened up before her: a void that was limitless. But he wanted her to be completely sure of herself, so that she might be ready to undertake the journey on which he was about to take her.

"I am a slave to Sri Ramakrishna, who left his work to be done by me, and will not give me rest until I have finished it," he said. And pointing to the opposite bank of the Ganges, just across from Belur, he added:

"Nivedita, that is where I should like to have a convent for women. Like a bird that needs two wings to fly, India must have both educated men and educated women."

So he revealed his cherished dream, and showed the haven to the unskilled navigator even before she had taken the helm.

Four days later the novice who had been teaching Bengali to Nivedita received the great initiation of sannyasa, with the name of Swami Swarupananda, and became a full fledged monk. Swami Vivekananda granted him the major investiture without stipulating any long probationary period. A few conversations had been enough to lead him to the happy exclamation: "To get an efficient worker like Swarupananda is a greater gain than to receive thousands of gold coins!"

Nivedita wondered: "Shall I, also, wear the robes of gerrua some day?"

## 11. *First Fruits*

TWO EVENTS which took place a few days before her formal dedication had brought Nivedita into the very heart of the life which her guru had designed for her. He had to all appearance merely sought to give her a clear indication of her future environment and a taste of the atmosphere she was to breathe, before finally committing her by her initiation. In practice, he was also throwing a bridge between her and the most orthodox Hindu life, and he stood by her like a guarantor until he was sure that she would receive a full welcome.

For India, with its exclusiveness, might have expelled instead of accepted her—even though by her association with her guru she already belonged to the company of those who have renounced the world and, through that fact alone, stand above all caste laws. On both these two occasions, therefore, Swami Vivekananda arranged that the foreign disciple should be publicly welcomed and dedicated to the service of India. For these moral initiations he chose, first, the Calcutta crowd, over which he held great ascendancy, and second, the more subtle and penetrating contact with Sri Sarada Devi, the widow of Sri Ramakrishna, whose sphere of influence included all disciples devoted to the Math.

Less than two months after Nivedita's arrival in India—on March 11th—she made her first public appearance, as arranged by the Swami, on the lecture platform: one of several speakers to take over a program before an excited and enthusiastic audience from a populous quarter of Calcutta. The subject of her

address was "The Influence of Indian Spiritual Thought in England"—and when she reached the somewhat shabby Star Theatre, crammed with an exclusively male audience, she had no idea how she was going to approach it. She noticed that in every row there were twice as many people as there were numbered seats. The faces were pressed close together, and they were crowned with the most diverse headgear: turbans of every color, and caps of various forms. Their sandals on the floor, their legs folded beneath them, all these men were staring at her. There was not a European in the hall. Four or five giant fans revolved just below the ceiling, and the big open window let in that indefinable hubbub of India which is made up of guttural cries, creakings, singing voices, shuffling sandals, and the croaking of crows; but the heat, none the less, was stifling. Margaret's platform experience kept her perfectly at ease, and as she appeared before this alien audience—tall, slender, beautiful, her eyes full of an eagerness which matched the character of her guru—her presence at once commanded respect.

Suddenly Swami Vivekananda's voice was heard: "Sister Nivedita is another gift of England to India. . . ."

As he spoke, and while he continued with his words of introduction, Margaret was reading the same questions in all the eyes turned on her: Who is this woman? What does she know about us? Is she still another missionary?

It was to these dumb interrogations that she replied, quite simply, pronouncing her words clearly so that all could understand her, "You have the ingenuity of six thousand years of conservatism. But yours is the conservation of a people who have, through that long period, been able to preserve the greatest spiritual treasures of the world; and it is for this reason that I have come to India, to serve her with one burning passion for service . . ."

She felt no trace of nervousness in describing how she had discovered India, and she enjoyed explaining how the spiritual thought of the Vedanta could exercise an influence in England. For apostles like Swami Vivekananda opened the hearts and minds and eyes of ignorant or intolerant people, who only knew the India of missionaries, civil servants, soldiers, and sensation-



seeking travelers. One day, Europe, weighed down by the burden of its riches, might turn toward India, envying its poverty and discovering the quality of its incorruptible spiritual treasure. . . .

To the question, "Who is Nivedita?" she had nothing to reply. Why? She confessed simply, "I must learn everything like a child; my education is beginning. Help me! When the road is difficult, I shall remember the welcome in your kindly faces. . . ."

Nivedita had spoken on a happy, detached note, carried away by the crowd's attention, but when she had ended, a poignant emotion gripped her. The contact had been established so completely that she was taken aback by the applause, suddenly jolted out of the intimacy she had created and thrown back upon her own solitude, whereas, before, she had felt her personality multiplied by all the eyes fixed upon her.

In his turn Swami Vivekananda had risen to address the crowd on the subject of that Western world which, by virtue of its Greek heritage, pays so much attention to the expression of its civilization and its expansion. If India wished to rise, it would have, like the West, to give expression to its thoughts and culture. By expressing itself it would develop. Let India use the great discoveries of the West which are at the service of all mankind, yes, let it use them for its own good—science and industry were the watchwords of the men of tomorrow. "But above all," he went on, "have confidence in yourselves. By doing so you will have faith in God. Infinite faith begets infinite aspiration. If that faith comes to us, it will bring back our national life to the days of Vyasa and Arjuna—the days when all our sublime doctrines of humanity were preached."

The ovation which had greeted Nivedita was now transferred to the Swami. But as she came down from the rostrum, a shout went up, "Sister Nivedita! Sister Nivedita!" The people crowded round her, and followed her as far as the door.

There she found Swami Vivekananda smiling, delighted at her performance. His aim had been achieved.

The second of the "moral initiations" planned by the Swami

took place several days later, when, accompanied by Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod, the new Sister Nivedita went to Bagh Bazar to visit Sri Sarada Devi.

Bagh Bazar is a Hindu district in the north of Calcutta, extremely picturesque with its wide-verandaed houses, its narrow streets between high walls, its misshapen lamp brackets holding enormous kerosene lamps. It had that other picturesqueness, too, of a poor and congested quarter that has seen better days. The life of its people overflowed from the houses into the streets, with lines of washing hanging up, with bedsteads and cooking stoves standing about. And, alongside, there were regal old houses, their façades eaten away by the rains, their iron railings and closed ornamental gates giving on inner courtyards and gardens of which nothing could be seen. Around the water faucets, set at the level of the ground, naked children shouted and played, and the goats that were their companions foraged in the muck heaps.

The Swami had been careful to prepare the interview between Sri Sarada Devi and the three foreigners: he knew that Nivedita would receive something of a shock when she saw the intimate household of an orthodox Hindu widow.

He wanted his new disciple, above all, to feel the sparkling joy that radiated from Sarada Devi; to absorb it completely, and even to envy her for it, before venturing on any opinion or comparison. This Hindu woman represented the model Hindu wife, the model widowed disciple, and for the monks even more, the model of the virgin mother in her perfect purity.

People, now, would be recounting her unique life and would tell how, while retaining the naïve and charming soul of a child, she had become for her husband, the saint of Dakshinesvar, the very embodiment of the *Shakti*, the power of Creativeness. The mystery of her life had begun very early. Sarada was five years old, playing and jumping about the village women as they went down to the pools to draw water, when her father, an austere brahman, decided to marry her to one of the priests who was in charge of a temple of Kali, far away down the Ganges at Dakshinesvar. The marriage arrangements had been discussed at length by priests and astrologers. All young girls were married

in this way and continued to live with their mothers for several years—there was nothing remarkable about that. But Sarada had been selected, designated, marked out by the finger of God, long in advance, as a field is set aside for the service of the temple before the harvest, to receive a chosen seed.

She had grown up in the country as she waited for her married life to begin. Her husband, meanwhile—concerned only with God—had completely forgotten her, although she did not know this. As she passed from childhood to adolescence she gradually went about less in the neighborhood of the village to gather grass for the cows or pluck the ripe cotton in the fields, for she had been taught to live within the courtyard of her house and never even to leave it unaccompanied: taught to work, to love silence, always to cover her face with her sari so that no stranger could look upon her. From her mother she learned everything that was expected of a woman; and with her mother she went every day to the temple of the goddess, in the center of the village, to make her offering.

Sarada was eighteen years old when the whispered rumor reached her that her husband had gone mad. At Dakshinesvar he had been seen going about like one demented, lost to all sense of time and place, speaking only to pour forth praises of his Divine Mother—Kali, the powerful goddess who stands at the shrine of the temple surrounded by flowers and offerings. And Sarada set out herself to learn the truth about him. She was ill with anxiety, but when she saw her husband her apprehension vanished.

"I am at your service," he said to her, and paid her solemn homage.

Sarada began to cry. In her husband's eyes she perceived infinitude, and she felt herself slipping into a state of ecstasy.

"I have come to help you along your way," she said, overcome with emotion. And this was all she could find to say: this said everything. Her virgin heart had already become that of a nun, ready to help, with all her strength, the husband who had given himself to Kali, his Divine Mother.

For years Sarada tasted the unique joy of serving, of practicing a limitless humility. A strange maternity! With no child

of her own to hold in her arms and her heart, she opened the heart of a mother wide to the spiritual children who sought refuge with Sri Ramakrishna, and welcomed them with a love that was ever renewed.

After her husband's death she accepted all the austere regimen of her position, in accordance with the discipline imposed upon brahman widows. And she was venerated by the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

For these disciples her white figure, veiled from head to foot, was the perfect image of impersonality, on which they centered all their desires and from which they drew the inspiration that brought them close to Sri Ramakrishna again. She would spend some time in her native village; then come, ever and again, to Bagh Bazar. A house was taken for her there, and in it she settled down with several women as her companions and with Swami Yogananda to act as doorkeeper. Here she lived an unostentatious life of complete devotion. Here the visit of the three Westerners provided not only an uncommon experience for Sarada Devi, but an excitement for the entire locality.

As the foreigners stepped from their carriage they were at once besieged by crowds of children. The door of Sarada Devi's house was half-open, and in the shadow of the porch Swami Vivekananda was speaking to the monk in charge. The callers heard a humming, as of bees, and a sound of low smothered laughter. Then the door was pushed open, a square of dazzling white light appeared in the dark house, and all noise ceased. On the floor in the corridor Nivedita noticed several large earthenware vessels filled with water.

She felt very nervous, as did her friends, when they entered the house. They were encumbered with superfluous impedimenta—sunshades, scarfs, handbags—which they did not know where to put. There was no furniture anywhere. Swami Yogananda invited them to take off their shoes; then he withdrew, with Swami Vivekananda, while they went upstairs.

As Nivedita went through the open door into the single room there, she saw some ten women sitting on the floor. In the center, and a little in front of the others, Sarada Devi sat

on a bamboo mat. She was wrapped in a white *sari* which also covered her head, but her right shoulder could be seen through light muslin, and her face was uncovered. Her long black hair hung down her back, and her bare feet were reddened as is the custom. She cast a welcoming look of peace upon her visitors, and, as they bowed deeply, she replied by joining her hands and raising them to her forehead.

Another woman came forward, her heels shuffling over the floor, one hand opened and spread out before her as if she were pushing her way. She laid three small embroidered mats carefully before that of Sarada, motioned to the newcomers to sit down, and withdrew. No word was spoken. The silence became heavy and irksome. Nivedita felt herself being stared at from all sides, and did not dare raise her eyes. Her ears were humming, her heart was beating in double-quick time. She heard a woman yawn. On one of the walls, stained by the dampness of summer rain, she saw an enormous lizard crawling.

Suddenly she heard whispering among the women, whose eyes were sparkling with curiosity. Something was going to happen! A woman had brought Sarada Devi a white earthenware plate containing sliced fruits, sweets, and a cup of milk; at once she set before each of the guests a copper tray with the same refreshments. To everyone's surprise, the hostess beyond all orthodoxy began to eat with her three children from overseas. Her face was all alight. "How beautiful she is!" said Nivedita, aloud, breaking the silence. She was struck by Sarada Devi's expression of serenity. Sri Ramakrishna's widow was forty-five years old, and her face was so pure and unsullied that it reflected her soul with the sure gleam of a diamond.

She had smiled, and through the medium of one of the women who knew English she now began an animated conversation. Sri Ma, as the disciples called her ("Holy Mother" is probably the best translation), wanted to know everything about her Christian daughters. "How is the Lord worshiped in your houses?" she asked. "What homage is He paid?" And then, to each of them, "Are your parents still alive?" While living the life of a complete recluse, Sarada Devi guessed at the diversity

of the outside world and rejoiced in it: the Lord manifests Himself in so many different ways!

The nervousness had vanished, the constraint was gone. The atmosphere was so friendly that Nivedita thought, "Why isn't Swami Vivekananda here to share this pure happiness?" She looked about for him, thinking that he might be just outside the door. Not seeing him, she asked for him. Her question seemed to amuse the women, and at the same time to cause embarrassment. Confused, she made a movement as if she herself would get up and call him. Then, suddenly, hurried steps were heard in the corridor, on the stairs; and all eyes turned to the door.

But before Swami Vivekananda entered the room, Nivedita understood the error she had committed in making her request. With a sound as of softly beating wings, the saris fell back upon the women's faces. Where there had been expressiveness, interest, individuality, every countenance showed now only its white, amorphous, impenetrable and meaningless shape.

Nivedita saw the Swami touch the threshold with his forehead, then prostrate himself before Sarada Devi. He remained motionless in his adoration, his face resting on the floor, until she stepped out and touched his head. Then he got up, motioned to the three Western visitors to take leave of their hostess, and, without a word, left the room. As soon as he had gone Sarada Devi raised her veil. She blessed each of her three callers. Then she looked at Nivedita for a long moment and said,

"My daughter, I am glad you came."

This phrase of welcome, of acceptance, became the talk of the neighborhood. "Do you know," the women of Bagh Bazar said, over and over to one another as they bathed in the Ganges, "she called her 'my daughter,' just like the rest of us!"

But the most striking evidence of the success of their visit—the thing that showed the three foreigners how much concern Sri Ma felt for them—was that Gopaler Ma, the most orthodox of all the women in her group, went with them in their carriage all the way to Belur. Gopaler Ma was a very old woman who had been blessed by Sri Ramakrishna after many years of soli-

tary austerity. As she could not speak English, she expressed the warmth of her sympathy by holding her new friend's hands, and stroking them. She loved them all equally, but she felt a special bond with Nivedita, who was to enter the life of the renunciation. With her, she told her beads that evening by the side of the Ganges.

## 12. *The Path of Sacrifice*

THE NEAR approach of May brought the certainty of torrid heat; in the stifling and unhealthy air of Calcutta it brought more—the threat of epidemic plague. At this time Captain and Mrs. Sevier, who had settled temporarily at Almora in the Kumaon mountains, invited Swami Vivekananda to visit them; they wished his advice about making a permanent home in the Himalayas. The Swami himself had had the idea of going back into the mountains—following much the same itinerary as on the previous year when he had journeyed among the people, and to the sites, that might be strong elements in the Order he was founding. And it seemed now that there were many reasons for making such a trip and taking his Western disciples with him.

He wished, moreover, to devote a considerable amount of time to Nivedita. He knew her very well: her devotion to himself, her dependence upon him, and, at the same time, her inherent capacity for self-abnegation. This journey to the mountain heights would be symbolically helpful to her. The gradual ascent which she was making, under his guidance, toward complete sacrifice of self corresponded to the steadily mounting climb toward those places of pilgrimage where for thousands of years worshipers had glorified God. Those parched landscapes studded with bare, wind-devoured crags that were like skeletons of the soul—were they not an appropriate and impartial setting



for the struggle between guru and disciple, before both united in the same wholeness of sacrifice?

The three women were overjoyed at the prospect of this pilgrimage, and at once made their preparations for it. They were to leave Calcutta on the evening of May 11th, and were to be joined by four of the monks; Turiyananda, Niranjananda, Sadananda, and Nivedita's former teacher (how long ago it seemed, yet it was less than five months!) Swarupananda. And when they took the northbound express at Howrath station their unconventionally made-up party astonished the Hindu crowd and the British officials alike. Neither, certainly, had ever imagined that smartly dressed Western women would travel in the company of sannyasins; could sit side by side with tonsured monks whose only personal luggage was a *kamandalu* (a flask made out of a dried pumpkin) and a huge black cotton umbrella to keep off the sun. . . .

There was the usual crowd on the departure platform, bivouacked among heaps of bundles. Women wrapped in their saris were asleep on the floor, their sleeping children in their arms. Iron trunks, painted, copper-studded, tied with rope, made great piles. Newcomers were arriving constantly, pushing and jostling, to wait hours for their train. Men swathed in multi-colored woolen shawls chewed betel and spat, apparently indifferent to what was going on about them but watching it with keen interest just the same.

Several coolies were hovering about Miss MacLeod and Mrs. Ole Bull, with their luggage balanced on their heads. Vendors of fruit and sherbet, wearing blue turbans and gaiters, were chasing away ragged urchins who tried to trespass on their preserves. The three women got into a compartment that had been reserved for them, and the guard locked the door. The Swami and the four monks had disappeared. In the general hubbub before the train pulled out, Nivedita saw a veritable deluge of humanity pour helter-skelter into the third-class carriages; huge parcels tied with string were thrown in through the windows as women and children clambered up the steps. Suddenly the train lurched, shuddered, and began to speed through the night.

When Nivedita awoke, dawn was breaking. A golden haze hung over the earth, spiralling upward in the reddish light. High in the sky gray eagles glided in huge circles. The train was steaming between hedges of silver cactus. On the telegraph wires whole families of jade-green parrots chattered, while kingfishers in flight revealed the emerald shimmer of their wings.

The red earth stretched as far as the eye could see, arid and parched, with gnarled furrows as if drawn by a giant's hand. Although the sun had not yet risen, women in the fields, long rows of bent bodies, were already at work. Had they chosen their saris in harmony with the natural scene? They were the color of the earth, audaciously mingling red with violet, orange with green. And in every group of workers there was a patch of turquoise blue that seemed to cry out in love and hope toward Krishna, the compassionate Lord who casts a veil of tenderness upon the implacable earth. From time to time a file of carts drawn by buffalos would appear along the roads that were built up between the fields; the animals plodded forward two by two, heads bowed beneath the yoke; tarpaulins, spread over hoops, swayed high above the massive wheels. Sometimes there would be the glimpse of a village; ten or a dozen thatched roofs clustering about a tiny white temple, itself shrouded in palms. Fires were burning near the houses.

The first stop in the morning brought the travelers together for breakfast. A station in India was a veritable stage where three comedies were played at the same time. The different waiting rooms and three different restaurants, placed next to each other and run by brahmans, Mussulmans, and Christians, invited clients behind their barricaded fences guarded by fierce porters. Three categories of fountain were besieged by travelers jostling to fill their gourds, carry out their ritual ablutions, sprinkle their heads with water, and wash their hands and feet. Hawkers balanced on their heads glass drums full of spiced pastries, honeyed sweets, and fritters glistening with oil. Vendors brought flowers, toys, fans, ironmongery, shell necklaces and clogs to the very doors of the train.

Nivedita stood at the window beside the Swami, pleased at

everything she saw. He observed the three women without seeming to notice their thirst for "exoticism" assuaged by contact with something "genuine." He let them amuse themselves, then, when the train started; he encouraged them to look at the country for itself. A caravan of camels kicking up the dust as they passed, and a flight of wild peacocks, led their imagination back to the time of the glorious sacred epics.

How true was the remark which he had made to Nivedita one day in London: "I loved India before I came away; now the very dust of India has become holy to me, the very air is holy to me now. . . ."

He looked at his country with the eyes of an artist and a poet and with the sensibility of a mystic, and he was able to explain to his disciples how custom and religion are the same thing. Every separate theme of life in India is like the unique prayer of the soul, he could point out: whether it be the recognized authority of the rajah, the father, the elder brother, the respect due to the mother; the guru or the veneration of a god in the temple. For Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu as he greets the sun with his prayers every morning and the Moslem as he bows five times a day to Allah are the epitome of Indian life and culture.

After leaving the plains, the first stop in the travelers' journey was at Naini Tal, a little town in the foothills of the Himalayas, six thousand feet above sea level. They reached it in sedan chairs. It was an enchanting spot. Swami Vivekananda was expected here by the ruler, the Maharajah of Khetri. The Prince's palace was built on a hillside with a sweeping view of the wide landscape: the hills cascading down to the lake, the forests of pine trees and rhododendrons strewn with enormous blocks of pink granite.

Giving a present example of the royal hospitality that is celebrated in the great epics, the Prince opened his doors wide to the monk's guests. "Whoever enters a house, be he a sadhu covered with ashes, a woman in tears, or the son of a king," he said, "the master of the house greets him like a messenger of the gods." The Prince did even more than that: he opened to

his guests the temple of the goddess-patroness of Naini Tal, which was hidden in a pine grove by the side of the lake.

Pilgrims throng to this temple at certain times in the year; but on the day when the three Western disciples visited it the only crowd was composed of those who were attracted by the sight of the palace carriages. If the monks had not been with them, the priests would never have allowed the foreigners to dip their fingers into the cool waters of the lake, or to walk about in the grounds to search out the tiny votive shrines. . . .

The temple door was open, and the visitors tried from the threshold to distinguish the statue of the presiding goddess. A priest held up a lamp, to light the figure on the shrine, but the three pilgrims' eyes were still blinded by the sun and they could see nothing but the flickering flame. Once, twice, the light flared up and went out. The strangers began to feel embarrassed. Suddenly Nivedita turned around. She saw the crowd massed behind them, watching them with spying eyes: an icy and impenetrable contact.

She tried to greet them with a few words in Hindi, but the only reaction was of withdrawal. The sole reply—in the form of an amused smile—came from two handsome young women dressed in rich glittering saris, who stood in the front row. Their heads were weighted with heavy jewels, which hung down over their foreheads, their ears and noses; the hands with which they hid their mouths were themselves hidden under heavy gold ornaments. The crowd was looking at them with the same curiosity which it bestowed upon the foreigners.

This brief episode surprised Nivedita; but her surprise reached the point of astonishment when, at the end of a long carriage drive, she found the same two women, and the same crowd, in front of the house where Swami Vivekananda awaited his three disciples. She smiled, now, at the richly dressed young women and this time, emboldened, they spoke. "We would like to go in to see the Swami, and receive his blessings," they said.

The reply came in a shout from the crowd: "Unclean women, be off with you!"

There was a moment of confusion and uneasiness. Nivedita remembered the Gospel. . . . Once upon a time the mob had brought out a woman of evil character to stone her, but the Lord Jesus had said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone. . . ." The monks who had guided the strangers let the two women pass. When they reached the Swami's side they prostrated themselves before him, and laid several pieces of gold at his feet as a contribution to his work. He blessed them, spoke a few words of tenderness, and sent them away, without any vestige of reproach or condemnation; for he saw in them, as in the purest woman, one of the myriad aspects of the Divine Mother.

Before this miracle of the worshiper and the Worshipped united by the bounty of her guru, Nivedita felt welling up in her something of that love which the Swami gave and received, without interposing anything of himself. She would have wished, herself, to have been both these prostitutes, that she might twice, in her soul, have tasted the manna of compassion and have felt on her face the look of the man of God.

Toward the end of the same day she was present at another moving scene, when she saw the Swami enter into deep communion with the people. He was speaking to an audience in the palace gardens, in the presence of the Prince. In his characteristic warm voice he summoned Hindus and Moslems:

"The hour of action has sounded. Let us join our forces. We must shake off the lethargy that is stifling us—we who have become a mass of slaves, without power or freedom, without life, and without will."

The Swami reached such heights of thought and feeling that tears ran down his cheeks. The crowd looked at him in wonder, asking themselves, "How is it that this sannyasin, who has given up everything, weeps over India like a grief-stricken lover? Is India in his heart, in his soul?"

The appeal was irresistible. Men quickly pledged themselves to become disciples. One of the younger ones cried out, boldly, "I can collect funds, a great deal of money. All that can be used to help send our best people to England. There they

will study; and when they have passed their Civil Service examinations they will return to become those good servants of India for whom we are waiting."

"Nothing of the kind, my man!" the Swami answered. "These fellows would, for the most part, become uprooted and alien in their ideas, and turn into hybrids. Of that you may be sure! They would live for themselves, and they would copy European dress, diet, manners, and everything else, and forget the cause of their own country. No, we must have strong men who are constructed essentially of elements that are in the soul of India, and who will live their ideal completely!"

Struck by these words, Nivedita felt bewildered. "But what is India, then?" she asked herself. "Swamiji speaks of it as Grandfather Hamilton spoke of Ireland, with the same fervor, the same belief. Could India exist as a 'nation'? Spiritually, yes; but in the physical sense is it not part of the British Empire? There are things I do not yet understand!"

She tried to find the answer on the face of the Maharajah, who was sitting next to her on the platform. But that face was impenetrable. The Prince's eyes, at once gentle and strong-willed, followed every gesture of the Swami with the confidence of a disciple in his guru.

The Swami's words and her own question were buried alike in Margaret's subconscious mind.

The last hours at Naini Tal were spent in supervising the preparation of the caravan which was to take the travelers across the mountains to Almora. The Prince collected a band of lithe and strong coolies, and also the best ponies, and soon everything awaited the signal for departure.

The caravan set out slowly, the women's litters in front while the monks, mounted on sturdy ponies, brought up the rear. The coolies were heavily loaded. Some of them had gone on in advance to prepare the halts. The pace had slowed considerably. Armed with long poles and flaming torches, men beat the thickets in front of them to scare away the possible tigers and bears; next came the coolies with loads supported by a leather strap

round their forehead, and the water-carriers with their black goatskins hanging from their shoulders. In front, the guides marched in silence to the rhythmic swinging of their lamps, so that the whole caravan looked like a single ribbon of flame following the meanderings of the trail.

The first halt was a dak bungalow at the edge of a dense cedar wood. The coolies pitched tents, untied the cords that held the water basins, lighted the fires. The night was cold. The snowy mountaintops vied in brightness with the stars that sparkled in the violet sky.

Swami Vivekananda, as head of the party, himself supervised the pitching of the tents. When the food was ready, the monks served it on huge plates made of leaves. The three foreign women, who did not know how to drink from the pitcher, had been given cups, and also forks and spoons.

Then song broke out among the coolies, who had caught up drums and cymbals to amuse themselves and were playing mountain tunes in a staccato rhythm. Their penetrating and monotonous melody was a sort of supplicating whine. The other men listened: heads nodding, eyes closed, hands on hips, they swayed where they stood in a veritable dance that shook the whole of their bodies. This went on until one of them shouted a piercing incantation, moved from his place, clasped his arms together, and threw himself on the ground. The spell was broken.

Sitting under a tree, Nivedita looked on at this scene as if she were contemplating something in a dream. She felt out of her element, like the little Hindu girl she had once seen on a foggy day in the West End of London, groping her way along the walls, and frightened by the dense traffic and the darkness. The supple bodies of the men before her were in harmony with the violent earth, and with the voluptuous twisted trees that rose to a domed height about her. . . .

Very early the next morning the caravan set out again, through forests where the trees were in flower. The men often had to break the branches of wild pomegranate, and of rhododendrons with trunks as thick as oaks, to let the caravan

through. On the ground, the ferns seemed to monopolize all the shafts of sunlight that filtered through the thickets.

On the evening of the second day, the guide announced the appearance in the distance of the mountain ridge on which the town of Almora lies as if sleeping. The beautiful journey was nearing its end. Nivedita noted in her "log book":

It is really not so near the world, perhaps, but as we have done all our traveling in huge caravans we have never once been away—and I cannot realize the distance and the solitude of this little mountain fortress. . . . There is a kind of pine called deodar, very like a larch and very like a cedar, huge, magnificent, and fragrant with the blackberry odor of English autumns. Up here the deodar grows all around us and adds, like everything else, to this unutterable depth. So do the snows: the great white range of the Himalayas, like a Presence that cannot be set aside, towers over there above the lower purple mountains in front.

Captain and Mrs. Sevier met the pilgrims; they took the Swami and the monks into their own house, while for the women they had rented a cottage, which was ready and waiting. Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod, experienced travelers, had brought everything needed to make the little house comfortable and homelike. They at once unpacked books and herbaria, brushes and pencils. Daily life was organized as at the Belur guesthouse. As for Nivedita, she felt no desire to do anything. Her one joy, at this point, was to pick the flowers she had never seen before, and to lose herself in their beauty.

Mrs. Bull looked upon Nature as an artist does. The shepherd's flute with its unexpected sonorities all in quarter-tones moved her as, in the past, the harmonies of counterpoint had done when she sat at her piano in the midst of the orchestra. Miss MacLeod—Jaya, as Swamiji liked to call her: Jaya, the Victorious One—was the boldest of the group, all fire and courage, never tiring. Her temerity had already become a legend. The coolies adored her. At the halts along the way she had slipped between the tents to question them all, to get to know each one personally. She watched them at work, supple and agile like genii of the forest. She would go off with them into



the mountains, searching out the picturesque villages. For her, these men were the illustrations to the stories the Swami told his disciples. Perhaps in some mysterious way they might incarnate some hero, some young god destined to lead her to his temple at the summit of the hills. . . .

Almora seemed to be such a place as heart and soul have dreamed of: a place where the spirit's joyous dreams come true. Yet Nivedita felt herself suddenly seized with an indescribable feeling of grief, and plunged into such solitude that, for a moment, her spirit wavered. She could not see the sun or the mountains or the deep valleys stretching in the distance. She did not dare look within herself, or raise her eyes to her guru. For four days she was sunk in a sorrow that she could not understand. And then she recognized its cause: her guru had withdrawn from her.

The fact was that Swami Vivekananda had deliberately chosen this time and place to put his disciple to a new test: that of standing alone, face to face with herself, with no external support, submissive to an austere discipline of self-sacrifice. In this same setting he himself, in his days of striving, had found peace through the fervor of renunciation. The moment had come, he was convinced, when Nivedita must meet this challenge. And he was convinced, too, that her proud soul would gradually surmount all the obstacles that lay in her spiritual path.

The real significance of the name he had given her—"Nivedita, she who had been dedicated"—had not yet penetrated to the depths of her being. But the passionate surrender of a nature which still listened to the echoes of Christianity had led her to the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, whose whole law of love, like that of Jesus Christ, was contained in the word *service*: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me." Her initiation had so intensified her sense of fraternity that she wrote, in one of her frank and intimate letters to her friend Nell Hammond a little later: "It has drawn me so close to the Hindus. They trust me now in such a different way! Before

that, we were all 'mother'\* to them; now I am 'sister': and, funny as it sounds, the latter title indicates a more genuine and individual relationship than the former." She had now to conceive of a much more austere dedication of her soul: "I dedicate myself to the One that has no second. . . ."

The mental retreat of Swami Vivekananda made Nivedita in her turn withdraw violently within herself. She searched her feelings and discovered they were mixed; she wanted to spare her guru the labor and suffering of bearing her burdens but nevertheless hungered for the spiritual self-realization which was reflected in the radiant faces of the monks. Was that a fault? Her enthusiasm led her to bless her spiritual guide, to follow in his footsteps, to watch him live. Why had he suddenly become so hard toward her?

It did not, however, occur to her to retreat before the difficulty which thus presented itself. Her old custom of believing persuaded her that she had not taken the wrong path. There was so much common ground between them. She was confident that the Swami was acting for her good. But for *what good*? If he did not tell her, how could she find it out for herself?

Profoundly as she loved and trusted him, she reacted now with obstinacy. She was annoyed because Swami Vivekananda seemed unaware of everything she did for him, because he paid no attention to anything she said to him, because he snubbed her. ("A daughter must not at any time act as if there were too few servants in her father's house," he said.) She felt an increasing bitterness welling up within her. She was surprised by this, but she could not master it; and her reproaches only aggravated the tension between her guru and herself.

Her repressed emotions warred with one another. Feelings would vanish, only to return a few minutes later in some unexpected form. Demons played within her, rebellious, exacting prattling, and persuasive, too, with a kind of beguiling hypocrisy. Deprived of her work, prevented from loving, she did not know how to express herself. She felt herself abandoned. For Margaret—for Sister Nivedita—the gift of herself implied the word *action*: action through love, through love for her guru.

Every woman is called "mother" in India.

"No," the monk replied to her rebellious questioning, "the gift of oneself is but a poor image of the gift of God, of the sacrifice of God in the mystery of creation. It consumes the entire self in meditation, in ecstasy, and it conducts that self toward selfless expression. How? By what means? Work, yes; but work of perfect purity. And blessed is he who works on the soil of India."

Her guru showed her only one way of discovering this gift of oneself: the way of humility, in which action becomes pure, clear, luminous, impersonal, in which it loses its idolatrous prestige and becomes like the constant repetition of a prayer, the Hindu *japa*, which is a real song of life. What does it matter what form the action takes? It exists with the same unconcern as the grain of corn which allows itself to be carried away by the wind and never chooses the ground in which it is to germinate.

This conception of action divorced from will power and enthusiasm caused Nivedita terrible sufferings. The work appeared to her entirely without consistency. Certainly, she had already accomplished the difficult step of no longer regarding or desiring the fruits of her work, by reason of the love which gives, gives always, without expecting any recompense. But how to conceive, in practice, action which is a pure fact? When she sought an explanation from her guru, he smiled. A woman can only learn from another woman—let the European woman, sure of her intellectual images, try to live her faith, like her Hindu sisters who are only guided by their intuition, by the single relationship existing between God and their soul!

It was a hard lesson for Nivedita. It was equivalent to showing her the goal of her yoga without revealing to her the means to attain it. She looked about her with every trace of self-sufficiency destroyed. What real value was expressed in the lives of the Hindu mother honored by her family like a goddess, the widow devoted to fasts and vigils, the nun begging from door to door? Was it the sum of their work or the attitude of all of them in the circumstances of their lives, which could be evaluated?

Nivedita tried to analyze herself, but she was constantly

brought back to more subtle forms of attachment which Swamiji was ruthlessly eradicating: every sacrifice made in his name and every desire to follow him in his work. When those forms of attachment disappeared, a void enveloped her and led her to fear solitude. Excluded from all worship, Nivedita felt like a beggar waiting for alms; she wept and felt thoroughly miserable.

In the face of these violent personal feelings in which Nivedita struggled, Swami Vivekananda's attitude remained impersonal. Not once did he show more attention to her than to the other women, not once did he address her outside of the morning classes which had been resumed as at Belur. He was calm, but absolutely firm. He scolded her; she felt irritated. The conflict was engaged. Nivedita knew that he was waiting patiently, but she refused to open her eyes. She would have liked to have been Mary at the feet of Jesus, given up to passive adoration.

During these days the only ray of sunlight she received came from Swami Swarupananda. The monk read the *Bhagavad Gita* patiently with her and taught her to meditate, to create a state of calm within her. He led Nivedita into the forest; when he sensed her chagrin, he sat down beneath a tree and, closing his eyes, let his mind relax in silence. Nivedita remained for hours beside him, comforted by his presence.

She wrote to Nell Hammond, in letters which described this period of effort while it was still fresh in her thought and feeling.

I cannot tell you how real this idea of meditation has grown to me now. One can't talk about it, I suppose, but one can see it and feel it here, and the very air of these mountains, especially in the starlight, is heavy with a mystery of peace that I cannot describe to you. . . . Meditation simply means concentration, absolute concentration of the mind on the given point. . . . And the minute you succeed in concentrating *all* your powers for a second, you have done it, the rest will speak for itself. But long before that, great things come to one, and if it is only the perfect stillness it is something wonderful—don't you think so? What Maeterlinck calls the "great active silence."

She wrote to Nell Hammond, too, of what an old monk had told her:

You should have only two subjects of meditation at first, and of these you should always be in the presence of some picture or symbol, so as to saturate your whole mind with the idea. One should be your own guru, and apart from him, one concrete subject besides. After the concrete, one is able to meditate on the abstract. . . . It is so curious how, the instant a gleam comes to one, one understands suddenly the necessity for solitude, and so many things that were only hearsay before.

Her grief was purification. She understood that compassion was a force which could submerge her, once she surrendered her life to the Life, once she saw the eyes of her guru as no more than a mirror of her soul in search of God. But now, was she undergoing defeat or victory? She was too sunk in her misery to know. The tension between guru and disciple had become so great, however, that Mrs. Bull, the oldest in the group, took it upon herself to intervene. A word was necessary to establish a truce. She spoke to Swami Vivekananda. He listened without replying, but very late that same evening, as the three women were sitting together on the veranda, he knocked at the cottage door.

"You were right," he said to Sarah Bull. "There must be a change. I am going away into the forest to be alone, and when I come back I shall bring peace." As illustration of his words, he pointed to the slender new moon in the blue night. "The Mohammedans think much of the new moon," he added. "Let us with it begin a new life!"

Nivedita had knelt before him. He raised his hand to greet the pale light, and blessed her at the same time.

She accepted without understanding. She felt only that, although, a wound was healed in a gentle reconciliation, a bond between herself and him had snapped, and an illusion had died.

Yet, as she remained sitting quietly for a long time after he had gone away, she realized that her sorrow had left her. The solitude that enveloped her seemed rich, now, as it was indefinable. She was not seeking her way any longer. She felt that

a new life was springing up within her; that her spirit had come face to face with the infinite Goodness; and her heart was fainting with love.

Nivedita awoke next morning with a feeling of weakness that was also, in itself, elation. The Swami had gone away "for several days." Would he come back? Perhaps she would never see him again. . . . She lay still, in the warmth of her sunlit room, her eyes closed, her mind tranquil, her thoughts coming and going like strangers to whom she did not listen, whom she neither welcomed nor desired. One thing remained true: to live calmly, passively, without movement, curled up within oneself, so as not to lose an atom of force. She felt that one shining weblike thread attached her to the Infinite: it was so frail that any thought might crush it, but it was the consciousness of a nascent new existence, and it was all she had. She clung to it, and let herself go. It seemed to her now that she could feel herself blossoming, and this was joy. The solitude amid encircling light became ineffable fullness, a smile of solacing strength. Several years later, looking back on this experience, she was to write to a friend:

Slowly the power of rest, the sense of largeness and space, came. Such letting go is really capacity for renunciation. In such moments, the divine is growing to perfection within us, and we find our own greatness only when the best comes.

She felt very faint when she got up, and she went out into the forest, stretched herself on the rocks, and read the *Gita* aloud. The words mingled with the songs of the birds around her, but nothing called her back from the immobility in which she had become a witness of herself, seeing the role she had played in the human comedy of her life. She had, so to speak, cast off her mental habit, and she was exercising herself with the delight of a being who is discovering his real powers, and who sees his thought concentrated in the "seed of his birth" before it springs up into a resplendent purity.

But she needed to unburden herself, to pour out her

thoughts, and feelings, at this crucial time, to a sympathetic friend. She wrote, at once, to Nell Hammond:

I am learning a great deal. . . . that there is a certain definite quality which may be called spirituality; that it is worth having; that the soul may long for God as the heart longs for human love; that nothing that I have ever called nobility or unselfishness was anything but the feeblest and most sordid of qualities compared to the fierce white light of real selflessness. It is strange that it has taken so long to make me see these elementary truths clearly, isn't it? And at present I see no more. I cannot yet throw any of my past experiences of human life, and human relationships, overboard. Yet I can see that the saints fight hard to do so—can they be altogether wrong? At present it is of course just groping in the dark—asking an opinion here and there, and sifting evidence. Some day I hope to have firsthand knowledge, and to give it to others with full security of truth.

This letter was signed "Nivedita." The woman who wrote it was conscious that she no longer had anything in common with Margaret Noble; it represented a soul that had grown broader and more powerful. Stripped of the personality that had imprisoned her, she was progressing, now, toward great achievement.

When Swami Vivekananda came back there was really peace between them. She had submitted to him entirely; and she had entirely forgotten all that she had suffered only a little while before. She perceived in her guru now only the "majesty of the King-prophet," and she felt the manna of goodness that fell about him every day. She served him with devotion; her soul found perfect quietness. Because the pupil had triumphed over her personal passions, the guru could lead her toward the light—they lived through a period of deep, moving spiritual intimacy.

### *13. Uprooted*

DURING THESE four weeks at Almora, as at Belur, Swami Vivekananda regularly met his disciples in the mornings for collective instruction. But collective as these classes were, the Swami concealed in them a very definite aim: they were the practical training ground, no less, for the complete transformation of Margaret Noble—imbued with all the predispositions and preconceived ideas of her English background—into Sister Nivedita with all the deep meaning the name implies into one who loved India for itself and could enter into the life of its people without pausing for disapproval, comparison, or even comment.

He kept her under constant observation. He knew very well that her English background formed the main obstacle in her attempt to cultivate a true affection for India. And he knew that she would have forcefully denied any accusation of harboring such prejudices. She was entirely unconscious of them. He made it his task now, therefore, to bring to the surface all those preconceived ideas that lay at the root of her most delicate problems. Systematically he pressed her to set aside her present criteria in social, literary, and artistic fields, without any anxiety for the inevitable but temporary affect which this would have upon her intellect. . . .

Up to now, Nivedita had looked upon India from the outside, not dissociating her new impressions from all that she had seen and heard before. This had seemed to her a normal, and



even necessary, procedure; but now her guru pointed out that if this attitude was ideal for sharpening the perceptions of the citizens of a free country, every nation had nevertheless the same right to develop according to its own particular propensities. An entirely new problem of development had arisen in India, where the civilization of the West had superimposed itself upon—or had taken over without assimilating—an ancient national heritage, and offered Indians the prospect of a modern life that was completely dissociated from the foundations of their religion.

Nivedita had never stopped to think of all this. She still considered Britain's interference in Indian affairs as having brought the measure of stability necessary for the improvement of material conditions. At Naini Tal the attitude of Swami Vivekananda had naturally surprised her. And she was even more astonished by his impatient demand, "Why do you insist on comparing this country with yours, what is suitable *here* with what is done *there*? Really, patriotism like yours is a sin."

Although she did not know it, her English attitude had given him a harsh shock on the very day after her initiation at Belur. In a seemingly casual manner, he had asked her, "Nivedita, to what great fatherland do you now belong?" And she had not understood; her loyalty was not yet to God. She had answered, "But, Swami, I am British." He had said nothing. And thus far he had merely observed her in her relations with Hindus. But now, like a gardener in the rainy season, he dug, rolled, and hoed the earth that was to take the seed.

To Nivedita herself, meanwhile, living with Indians had presented strange and unforeseen problems which she was unable to see in true perspective. In her own human associations, for example, she discovered the most glaring contradictions. For one thing, she was considered "unclean" by people who, in her eyes, were ignorant of the most elementary principles of hygiene. Then there was the difficulty of the food question: the dishes cooked by the monks were delicious, but could she have tasted the food that was sold in the several shops on the roads or the curries that the Indian women cooked on the ground in front of their houses? She could not, in spite of herself, help recalling

what she had heard about India since her childhood—even before she knew where it was on the map—and she could not help seeing the sordid misery which had been the main subject of missionary reports. Wherever she went, she found examples of this distress, and she became at last seriously disturbed by them; the lepers begging at the roadside, the children running after the carriages and beating their swollen bellies, and, in some districts, the scraggy beasts searching for a blade of grass to eat.

She pitied the lot of all these wretched folk, and she talked about charity, and funds to be raised, until Swami Vivekananda said to her sharply.

“All I want you to see is that, with the majority of people, charity is nothing but the expression of an egoistic interest.”

He would allow no compromise whatever and would flare up, on occasion, into immediate argument. After traveling in Europe or America he knew by experience that for a long time to come the white race would continue to consider as “pagan”—or as “exoticism”—any measures that were not dictated by itself; he knew that the colored man, harassed object of curiosity, would with few exceptions continue to be looked upon as a poor and patronized relation. In his bold attempt to carry the message of India to the West, only divine love had sustained him and overcome the obstacles in his path; and it was in this same understanding that he refrained, at the moment, from telling Nivedita what a white woman who had consecrated herself to the service of India would have to suffer at the hands of orthodox Hindu society. He was certainly not unaware of what this was likely to be. But he intended that the tolerance he was to preach and demonstrate should itself become the effective weapon in his disciple’s hands.

Many years later, in writing the life of the Swami Vivekananda, Nivedita was to describe those days of struggle:

It seemed as if going-to-school had commenced; and just as schooling is often disagreeable to the taught, so here, though it cost infinite pain, the blindness of a half-view must be done away with. A mind must be brought to change its centre of gravity. It was never more than this; never the

dictating of opinion or creed; never more than emancipation from partiality. Even at the end of the terrible experience, when this method, as regarded race and country, was renounced, never to be taken up systematically again, the Swami did not call for any confession of faith, any declaration of new opinion. He dropped the whole question. I went free. But he had revealed a different standpoint in thought and feeling, so completely and so strongly as to make it impossible for me to rest, until later, by my own labours, I had arrived at a view in which both these partial presentments stood rationalized and accounted for. . . . But at the time they were a veritable lion in the path, and remained so until I had grasped the folly of allowing anything whatever to obscure to me the personality that was here revealing itself.

During all this time Swami Vivekananda protected her against herself so that the great Hindu family which had welcomed her should not suspect her reactions. He kept her isolated until she had become the woman he was striving to make her. He relied on her *savoir-faire* to bridge the gap between herself and the spirit of the Hindu who obeys unconditionally the laws imposed by his guru, sacrificing the principle of personality to that of the group. At the same time he sought to widen her horizons so that in every position of authority she should remain completely herself.

Nivedita was still incapable of appreciating these nuances. Indeed, she experienced moments of satisfaction when, unexpectedly, she found her thoughts in harmony with those of the Hindus. But these moments were fleeting, and the spell was easily broken. She had felt it during their journey and sometimes a sleeping anger had come to life within her—that forgotten anger of the Irishwoman on her guard. She had seen the Swami endure in silence the most cruel insults on the part of the English. In the circumstances, as the true granddaughter of Richard Hamilton, she would have flared out in anger, had not the Swami's attitude of perfect calm prevented her. At first she had not understood why, during the journey, he had preferred

to eat with his monks in their carriage, but at a station one day she had seen a liveried servant debar him from entering the restaurant into which she and her friends were going. Another time, an employee had burst into the compartment where the travelers had gathered during the day and had ordered the five monks out. The Swami and the monks withdrew in silence.

Nivedita herself had had some unpleasant experiences. Once she had got really angry in a northern town which the three Western women were visiting in the company of a Hindu friend of the Ramakrishna Mission. He had taken them to the Hindu quarter, and a group of little girls had run out after them, shouting, "Memsab, Memsab!" [the name given to Western ladies]. They were dirty but pretty, with colored beads round their neck and bright flowing veils—mostly in rags—around their heads. Mrs. Bull had thrown them a handful of small coins, and the children had pounced upon this largesse, when suddenly a policeman appeared, truncheon in hand. The people all around jostled one another, with cries of terror. And Nivedita, shocked and indignant, burst into vehement protest.

"What do you mean by this?" she demanded of the policeman. "I did not call you."

The policeman was amazed at her outburst. And the Hindu friend, terrified lest the incident have a sequel, hurried Nivedita away.

"Miss Noble," he exclaimed, "if you go on protesting like that, you will not be able to move about in India at all!"

At Almora, too, the situation was no less difficult. The pilgrims had hardly been there a few days when one of the monks was informed that the police had set spies to watch the activities of the Swami. Nivedita was thunderstruck.

"The government must be mad, or at least prove so if Swamiji is interfered with," she wrote to Nell Hammond. "That would be the torch to carry fire through the country. And I, the most loyal Englishwoman that ever breathed in this country (I could not have suspected the depth of my own loyalty till I got here) will be the first to set it alight! You could not

imagine, living in England, what race hatred means. Manliness seems a barrier to nothing!"

Four months later, in Kashmir, Nivedita was a witness to the same sort of opposition. The Maharajah wished to hand over to Swami Vivekananda an estate on which a Sanskrit college was to be established. But authorization for the transfer of deeds was refused. Why? The Swami's great dream collapsed. But in the face of this defeat he said simply, "The Divine Mother has other plans. It does not meet with Her approval that the work which will join East and West should be instituted in an Indian State. She has chosen a more difficult route. It is written that Calcutta, the intellectual center of the country, shall be the field of our experiment."

"How is it," Nivedita asked, "that an Indian Maharajah cannot give a brother of his faith an estate that is his own property? How is it that a Hindu cannot work freely at home for the good of his own country?"

It soon became officially known that the British Resident, Sir Adalbert Talbot, had refused to allow the project to be discussed in the Council. Following upon attacks by Christian missionaries, this ruling set itself in opposition to the establishment of an Indian cultural center for the teaching of Sanskrit. Incapable of remaining neutral, Nivedita took a stand in the conflict.

"It is just possible, if this happens, that I may go for a private interview with the Resident without Swamiji's knowledge," she wrote to Nell Hammond. "I have at least as much right to speak for the Master to the representative of our government as against him. . . . As an Englishwoman, how could one bear England to do the mean thing?"

Gradually, however, she was won over to the Swami's attitude: the knowledge of how to let oneself be carried by the current as one works, how not to waste one's energy. But at the same time, in order to make good use of the material she had collected, she prepared a paper on the relations between India and Britain, to be published in London. From her point of view, Britain was playing a vital role in India in spite of mis-

takes. Shocked by the idea of the white man muzzling the Hindu born, she tried to clarify her conception of the "individual" (it was Peter Kropotkin who had taught her to do this): Is not man the product of the soil which engenders him, she argued; an expression of spontaneous life which no one has the right to stifle?

In this summer of 1898, Nivedita's letters to Nell Hammond continued to be full of political preoccupations. She was passing through a transitional stage of development, of which she herself was of course totally unconscious, and her notes and comments show this.

To do England justice, I think India is in many ways well and faithfully served by her sons, but not in such a manner as to produce the true emotional response. On the other hand, of course, every nation demands freedom: Italy from Austria, Greece from Turkey, India from England naturally, and in the course of centuries the Hindu may be equal to the peaceful government of himself and the Moslem. At present, the only possible chance of that political peace which is essential to India's social development lies in the presence of the strong third power coming from a sufficient distance to be without local prejudice.

This was written in June from Almora where Nivedita talked with several well-informed Hindus who were spending the summer there, and twice she met Mrs. Annie Besant, who told her that she herself had no hope of influencing the English who were then in India. Mrs. Besant placed all her hope in the enlightenment of English public opinion at home, so as to change the point of view of those who were about to go to India. With this, Nivedita did not agree. The two women had many talks on ways and means of establishing useful contacts, but Nivedita persisted in believing in the necessity for action in India itself. In early September she sent a message, through Nell Hammond, to all her London friends:

I want everyone I know to get me every Anglo-Indian introduction that they find possible. So please be on the lookout! I see great possibilities before anyone here who has a large and influential acquaintance, in the way of so

utterly changing public opinion, and illuminating public ignorance, that you can hardly imagine it. It is the dream of my life to make England and India love each other.

She spoke of this plan, with characteristic enthusiasm, to her guru. He encouraged her: "Work; seek; perhaps you will find a way." But he was less hopeful than she was. "He says he held my opinion two years ago," her letter to Nell Hammond continued, "but now he despairs. That is after the insults of two years. But I hope I shall not lose hopes about his nation as quickly as he about mine."

Did she notice the change in her attitude? It seems unlikely. But the change was there. Softened by the strange tenderness that emanates from the soil of India, she was viewing it through new eyes, asking herself no more questions but co-operating fully with her guru and his followers. She was trying merely to be a tool in his hands.

She would have liked the Swami to allow her to go knocking like a beggar on the doors of the rich, to say to them, "Give me money, books, clothes, rice, medicines; give without counting the cost, and without asking whither the wind will carry the offering." Yet she had the perspective to laugh at this impulse in herself: "In my childhood I never could lower my pride even to ask my own mother for food without the most terrible effort, and nowadays I don't in the least mind asking for things!" Gradually, the rule of life that Swamiji had laid down for her at Belur—in anticipation of the day when she would really enter into Hindu living—took on its full significance. "You will have to set yourself to Hinduism," he had said. "Your thoughts, your deeds, your conceptions, your habits. . . . Your life, internal and external, will have to become all that an orthodox brahman *Brahmacharini's* ought to be—like one consecrated to God. The means will come to you, if only you desire it enough. But you have to forget your own past, and cause it to be forgotten. You have to lose even its memory!"

Years later, Nivedita was to write: "Swamiji gave me a unified purpose. I am rich!"

## 14. *Disappointment and Discovery*

THAT SAME summer was to hold, for Nivedita, experience far more poignant than comment on politics. At the beginning of June the whole party set out for Kashmir which was the final goal of Nivedita's pilgrimage.

In the torpid summer heat the caravan descended slowly towards the plains. The forest was entirely still, except when troops of blackheaded gray monkeys approached boldly. Once, when the Swami ordered a halt near a votive shrine, the guides and coolies seized the opportunity to pay homage to the god Hanuman: the perfect servant, monkey-faced, who waited upon Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu. They burned camphor, laid a coconut on the shrine; but before they were on their feet again hairy hands had reached from the trees to snatch up their offerings. Everybody laughed. "Greetings to Thee, Hanuman," cried the coolies. "Protect us, work with us, sustain us, Hanuman, King of the forests!"

From Kathgodam they took the train. Then they went on toward the extreme north and the teeming cities of the Punjab. At Rawalpindi, well up in the mountains, the group broke up, and Swami Vivekananda and the three women continued the journey to Muree in *tongas*—a kind of carriage drawn by two bullocks, its wooden floor balanced on two massive wheels, extremely mobile but also very uncomfortable. In the steep gorges of the Jhelum river the pace slackened. At Duali the rains caught them at the bottom of a ravine through which the river raced in flood. The next stop was Uri, built like a fortress, with



its bazaars walled about with dried earth. On the third day they reached a pass, crowned with the ruins of a temple to the sun, where the whole Vale of Kashmir lay spread out before them, encircled by white mountain peaks. From Baramulla on, their route followed the meanderings of the river flowing through fields of iris; they hired three houseboats, towed from the banks, and in them they glided noiselessly on the blue water between tall reeds, carpets of lotus, and poplar trees growing along the river's banks. The song of the boatmen and the gurgle of their hookahs were the only sounds that reached them.

At the halts, the Swami sent the three women to wander off to explore all this beauty further, while he himself disappeared for the day, returning only as the boatmen were lighting their resin torches at nightfall.

A brilliant series of social events welcomed the party at Srinagar, the capital of the State of Kashmir. The Maharajah invited Swami Vivekananda to visit him at his summer residence. The two American women were quickly absorbed by the cosmopolitan throng of summer visitors. During the first fortnight there was a constant succession of visits among the various houseboats, tours to the floating gardens, and expeditions to palaces and temples on the outskirts of the city. Although the mornings continued to be reserved for the Swami's instruction of his disciples, Nivedita could see that this social life—necessary for winning sympathy for his Order—was weighing upon him, and that he was feeling an increasing strain. He did not hide his desire for solitude. Every day she was afraid he might go off to some distant monastery, alone.

The land of Kashmir was calling to him, filling him with a tangible sense of divine presence. He had taken to the West the concept of an impersonal God; now in the heart of the mountains he was overwhelmed by a profound yearning for immolation before all the figures and faces of the Hindu gods. He called upon them to worship them, he evoked them in all their symbolic forms and manifestations.

One day he set out alone, plunged in deep meditation, in the direction of Amarnath, the one spot in India where Shiva lets Himself be approached. The mountain paths were still so deep

in snow that he was obliged to turn back, but he returned with a new determination in his heart and a new glint in his eyes: he would go to meet Shiva at this sanctuary where, on one day in each year, the Unknowable allows Himself to be seized by Nature in an ever-changing form—a lingam of ice; he would take Nivedita with him. . . .

A few days later the little party left Srinagar, going deep into the forest, visiting the ruined temple of Pandrenham, the two great temples of Avantipur, and those of Bijbenara and Marthand. They were on the pilgrim road to Amarnath, and as they met more and more pilgrims the Swami's exaltation increased.

"Do you hear the call?" he asked Nivedita. "Are you ready? The time has come to go!"

He had no wish now to set out with his staff alone. Nivedita must tread the same path, climb the same mountain, partake of the same sacrifice. If he desired to prostrate himself before the lord Shiva, he wanted also to dedicate Nivedita to Him.

She knew this. "I am coming, O Lord," she answered. "Show me the way."

When Swami Vivekananda spoke of this desire to Mrs. Bull, she approved. It was decided that she and Miss MacLeod were to accompany the Swami and Nivedita as far as Pahlgam and wait for them there. On the next day, therefore, the boats were exchanged for mules and litters. But soon the two pilgrims left their companions and followed the procession of devotees who chanted, "*Namah Shivaya!* I prostrate myself before Shiva," unendingly as they walked.

The presence of a foreign woman had aroused at first considerable opposition among the pilgrims, especially in the camps during the nights. Some sadhus complained openly to Swami Vivekananda: "It is true that you can impose her, Swamiji; but you ought not to manifest your power!" The Swami tried to lessen this opposition. At the first opportunity he had taken Nivedita through the camps, so that she might distribute alms and rice, and receive the blessing of those who accepted her offerings. The Swami's presence calmed the most vigorous opponents. The women looked upon Nivedita without hostility:

was she not a sister, come, as they were, to implore Shiva's grace? Meanwhile she recognized some of the women who, like herself, followed the pilgrimage in palanquins, and they exchanged timid smiles.

At Pahlgam, the first camp had taken on the appearance of some mobile town, with tents of all sizes and shapes set in rows to leave paths between, and with lines of shops that sold rice, lentils, soy beans, peanuts, brown sugar, dried fruit, and even firewood. The sadhus and sannyasins kept together, and the laity—men and women—were grouped together by caste and by village. The next camp, at Chandanaware, on the edge of a ravine, was much more primitive. Rain had begun to fall, and the air was cold. After that began the hardest part of the journey.

According to her guru's wish on the last day Nivedita walked with the pilgrims up the goat track that mounted almost vertically in the avalanche path. Next they crossed a glacier to a forsaken plateau where the tired pilgrims flung themselves down on the stones, breathing hard. They were above the timberline now, but the ravines were thick with edelweiss. When they pitched camp that evening at an altitude of 18,000 feet, Nivedita's ears were buzzing, her eyes bloodshot. She had made the climb with difficulty, and she felt desperately lonely in the midst of this passionately searching crowd. Through the grueling day she had sought refuge in the everlasting God of her childhood, the Lord of Armies, the Eternal One who controls worlds. And, "What shall I *see* at Amarnath?" she asked herself a hundred times.

She would have liked to escape from her old Puritan inhibitions, to feel nothing but the roots that bound her to the earth. She would have liked to merge herself with the piety that surrounded her, to sing the songs of grace that were being repeated a thousand times. But she did not know how to attain this state of mind. Her guru, meanwhile, had become a pilgrim among thousands of other pilgrims, following a frank and humble faith. In the sunlit mountains, in the clouds, he was worshipping everywhere the resplendent vision of Shiva beholding the birth of the world out of chaos. "The Hero of heroes is the ruler of

these valleys," he cried. "Everything belongs to Him—the earth and the sky and the seas and the stars. Shiva! Shiva! Forever am I Thy slave! Did not my mother on the day of my birth place me on Thy shrine, bestowing on me the name of Vireshvara, the Supreme Hero? I can only obey Thy will. Grant me to see Thee in the Infinite!"

The ascent of the crumbling slopes to Pantaharni, the "junction of the five rivers," was the most dangerous part of the journey, but the pilgrims now advanced in a paroxysm of exaltation, bathing in every creek along the river. At last they had to make their way for miles along a glacier, above which the grotto of Amarnath was perched. Swami Vivekananda, all but exhausted, was almost at the end of the procession, but he avoided none of the hardships of the way. They reached Amarnath on the second of August, the day of days.

There Vivekananda experienced one of the supreme moments of his life, and Nivedita was sunk and lost in agony.

He entered the dark grotto with nerves on edge, breath gone, his half-naked body trembling violently. Overcome with emotion, he prostrated himself three times on the ground, and made the one offering he had brought to Shiva: the life of Nivedita. In ecstasy he experienced divine grace, in the Unknowable he found revelation. Dizzy, half-paralyzed, almost fainting, he staggered away. Beside him, Nivedita had remained inert, bewildered, anguished. Where was this god to whom she had come to pay homage?

The cold and her own suffering of spirit enveloped her like a stifling shroud. She looked for her guru, but he had disappeared. Lost, abandoned, she was choked by a cry of revolt. The Swami's mystical experience became something she could not bear. Why, why had he not shared it with her? She had seen him immersed in beatitude, his hands over his eyes as if he were blinded by too much light, stumbling in the throes of a divine passion, stammering, "Shiva, Shiva." But what was to become of *her*? She stayed in the grotto until the cold drove her outside. She did not know where to turn. When she found her guru again she reproached him bitterly, and he looked at her sadly. He would have liked to reply, "Peace, peace; the felicity

lies only in the gift of oneself." But Nivedita, shut in by her despair, was incapable of listening to him.

"It is such a terrible pain," she wrote to Nell Hammond five days later, "to come face to face with something which is all *inwardness* to someone you worship, and for yourself to be able to get little farther than the external. Swami could have made it live, but he was lost."

Yet he was all kindness and consideration. He held her hands in sympathy. He looked after her with infinite tenderness, as if she were a tired child. He tried to comfort her, to make her drink some tea thickened with butter. He watched over her until, exhausted by her grief, she fell asleep. And he kept close beside her as they set out in the icy cold the next morning, the procession singing hymns of grace, and Nivedita walking along like an automaton. She kept murmuring, "Why? But why? I don't understand." And he suffered with her, in deep humility, though he could no longer talk to her. When, at the end of ten hours' march, she was still asking, "Why?" with tears in her eyes, he answered: "Margot, I have not the power to give you what you want. You do not now understand. But you have made the pilgrimage, and it will go on working. Causes must bring their effects. You will understand better afterward. The effects will come."

The return journey through the ravines was much shorter. The first night, the tents were pitched in a snow field before they saw the valleys covered with anemones. The peasants brought the pilgrims hot drinks and flap bread roasted on charcoal. The pilgrims went to their homes in the plains, in small groups, by different routes. The Swami and Nivedita rejoined Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod at Pahlgam, and they went back to their houseboats at Srinagar.

In the letter she wrote to Nell Hammond from there, Margaret was trying to collect her troubled thoughts:

Even now I can scarcely look back on those hours without dropping once more into their abyss of anguish and disappointment; but I know I am wrong, for I see that I am utterly forgiven by the King, and that in some strange way I am nearer to him and to God for the pilgrimage. For I

was angry with him and would not listen to him when he was going to talk. If only I had not been a discordant note in it all for him! If I had made myself part of it by a little patience and sympathy! And that can never be undone. The only comfort is that it was my own loss; but such a loss! You see, I told him that if he would not put more reality into the word "Master," he would have to remember that we were nothing more to each other than an ordinary man and woman, and so I snubbed him and shut myself up in a hard shell. . . . The next morning, as we came home, he said, "Margot, I am not Ramakrishna Paramahansa," The most perfect, because the most unconscious, humility you ever saw. She still cried, but she no longer asked herself questions.

Vivekananda himself was exhausted, even broken, by the possession of the divine. The vision of Amarnath had left his heart torn and bleeding. He turned for refuge to Kali, the Divine Mother, and it was at this time that he wrote the best of his poems describing her as she appeared to him in the death of his ego. "Meditate on death," he said to Nivedita. "Worship Kali the Terrible. She is all-powerful. She can make heroes even out of stones."

In September, Swami Vivekananda received official word that his plans for a center of Sanskrit learning in Kashmir had definitely and finally failed. Neither Nivedita's repeated interviews with the British Resident nor the American disciples' representations to their consul had been of any avail. The Swami met this blow and began to prepare for the next step by going alone to the temple of Kshir Bhavani, to spend a few days in worship of the "Great Mother who controls everything." Before he went, he spoke of Kali, once more, to Nivedita:

"Mother, Mother! Call upon Her! She will come because you belong to Her. But be ready to welcome Her when She takes hold of you!"

Left with no further guidance during the week of her guru's absence, Nivedita followed this advice and worshipped the Virgin

Mother of Hindu faith, as a child nestling in Her arms. The Virgin Mother in all faiths is always smiling, always blessing while the continual whirl of life and death is stirred up in Her creative movement, in Her willed destruction. The waves roar, the mountains are shaken. Kali, the black Virgin of India, passes like the wind . . . She leans down, and caresses the heaviest ears of corn. With one hand She snatches, with the other She blesses. She smiles at him who sees Shiva dancing in the sunlight of dawn.

Nivedita was looking at Kali passing. The great symbol became for her the point of balance in the continual interplay of powers. She felt nonplused, for, accustomed to see in the Divinity merely that ideal of perfection at which the Christian aims, she had not realized how much egoism was hidden in the Divine Providence—which pictures merely a helpful and sympathetic God, and excludes God in the volcano, God in the cataclysm. "Is the cult of the Perfect God," as the Hindus claim, "nothing but the bargaining of a shopkeeper?" She was approaching that truth, vaster in spite of its crushing audacity, that God manifests Himself through evil in the same way as He manifests Himself through good. The attitude of the true fighter is to throw himself on the point of the sword, to become one forever with the Terrible, to seek the death of the ego and not the life of the ego—the death beyond which is Life.

Nivedita prayed first with a torrent of words. Then there were no more words. She felt the motion of Kali springing up within her as She brandished Her bell to call the crowd. She saw Her leap into the void like a tongue of lightning. Why had not men hung about Her neck a rosary of hearts, from which their ardent feelings could spring forth? That would not have been enough. They have adorned Her with death; rosaries of skulls are shattered together on Her breast, dripping blood. Men watch Kali pass, clothed with all their loves and hates, with all their crimes in brutal reality. They worship Her because She delivers them from themselves by taking upon Herself all their sins. They worship Her because She is the fullness where all opposites are engulfed.

Nivedita looked straight into the face of this Terrible Mother. Her whole being was uplifted toward Her. Her noblest aspirations, Her most sordid instincts, were blended with equal force. Like a skillful sailor she gathered all her canvas about the mast of her life so that every wind, straight or adverse, drove it on to its destination.

All around her was a vision of brooding life. Spirit and matter were wedded under the full light of day—Shiva, the creative Word, and Kali, the Queen of Life, clasped together like the sun and the earth, the elements mingled in a harmony without beginning or end, so as to be forever the eternal gift of Nature. The earth exulted, the waters leaped up, the green trees shuddered. Kali passed, continually changing Her expression so that all men, thirsting to see Her, might recognize Her. She gave them Her power, Her force, and mocked their intelligence which kept seeking to capture Her, subdue Her, move Her. She hid Herself behind a shifting veil. "Mother, Mother," stammered Nivedita, "let me drink at the living spring. . . ."

Later, in *Kali, the Mother*, she was to set down what she felt the message of the goddess to be:

Arise, my child, and go forth a man! Bear manfully what is thy lot to bear; that which comes to thy hand to be done, do with full strength, and fear not. Forget not that I, the giver of manhood, the giver of womanhood, the holder of victory, am thy Mother. Think not life is serious! What is destiny but thy Mother's play? Come, be My playfellow awhile, meet all happenings merrily. . . . Ask not of plans. Need the arrow have any plan when it is loosed from the bow? Such art thou. When the life is lived, the plan will stand revealed. Till then, O child of mine, know nothing! . . . Ask nothing. . . . See nothing. . . . Plan nothing. . . . Let My will flow through thee, as the ocean through an empty shell.

Shrink not from defeat; embrace despair.

Uproot every interest that would conflict with mine.

Look for no mercy for thyself, and I shall make thee bearer of great vessels of mercy to others.

Be steadfast in the toil I set thee.



Strong, fearless, resolute—when the sun sets and the game is done thou shalt know well, little one, that I am Kali, am thy Mother.

When Swami Vivekananda returned from Kshir Bhavani, Nivedita laid her head at the feet of her guru and said,

“Now I know *my* Divine Mother.”

## 15. *Lessons in an Interlude*

AFTER THREE full months spent in Kashmir the little party broke up at Swami Vivekananda's suggestion. Miss MacLeod and Mrs. Bull went to visit Northern India; Nivedita returned to Calcutta. Her last days at Srinagar were spent in a state of complete passivity. She did not care what the future would be. But she knew that she was breaking with the comfortable—indeed luxurious—existence that she had shared with her friends for the past nine months, and that she was now about to be plunged into the practical experience of Hindu life.

Nobody could give her any advice. The remnant of stability in her, necessary for making plans, had already been shattered by her guru three times. The first was on the day before they went to Amarnath, the second two days after their return from that pilgrimage, and the third in the realization of Vivekananda's changed state of mind and spirit when he came back from Kshir Bhavani. On each occasion he urged her to a spirituality without proselytism, "priestliness," or the overexaltation of any one person or creed; he spurred her to guard against her tendency toward undue discipleship and to find and follow her own inspiration.

Unexpectedly, before they went to Amarnath, he said to her: "You never mention your school now. Do you sometimes forget it? You see, I have much to think of. One day I turn to Madras and think of the work there. Another day I give all my attention to America or England or Ceylon or Calcutta. Now I am thinking about your work."

She explained that she wanted to make a modest beginning, with an educational experiment based entirely on the religious life of the Hindu women and the cult of Sri Ramakrishna.

"Because you must be sectarian to get enthusiasm, must you not?" the Swami answered. "You will make a sect in order to rise above all sects, isn't that it? Yes, I understand. . . ."

Later, on this same occasion, he was more definite: "You ask me to criticize your plan, but that I cannot do. For I regard you as inspired, quite as much inspired as I am. You know that is the difference between other religions and us. Other people believe their founder was inspired, and so do we. But so am I, also, just as much as he, and you as I, and, after you, your girls and disciples will be. So I shall help you do what you think best."

Then, seeing that Nivedita was embarrassed and was mixing into her plans elements of the proselyte's haunting desire to obey, he invoked Shiva's blessing upon her.

"Yes, you have faith," he said, "but you have not that burning enthusiasm which you need: you want to be consumed energy. Shiva! Shiva!"

It was to liberate her from every fixed form of worship that he led her to the roughest of all symbols—a block of ice in the dark cave of Amarnath. But where the shepherds who had first stumbled into that grotto had seen the Lord Shiva—white, resplendently brilliant, come to reassure them—Nivedita had found only a cry of anguish. When the Swami had received news of the failure of his Kashmir plans and was pondering on the best means of rendering the contemplative life of India practical, of liberating the immense spiritual power imprisoned in Hindu orthodoxy, he said to her, again:

"Take care. A message of universal tolerance can only spread through if it avoids all crystallization. My own life is guided by the enthusiasm of the great personality of Sri Ramakrishna, but others will decide for themselves how far this is true for them. Inspiration is not filtered out to the world through one man."

But the great shock came for Nivedita when she saw her guru return from Kshir Bhavani with the voice of a child, a radiant

countenance, and speech that was overflowing with innocent tenderness. Work, ambition, disappointment—all this had faded away. The leader of men, the teacher, the pilgrim, had ceased to exist. Nivedita knew that a valuable experience was over.

"Swami is dead and gone," she wrote to a friend, in October of this changing, crucial year of 1898. "He is all love now; there is not an impatient word, even for the wrongdoer or the oppressor. It is all peace and self-sacrifice and rapture. Nothing would surprise me less than his taking the vow of silence and withdrawing forever. But perhaps the truth is that in his case this would not be strength but self-indulgence; and I can imagine that he will rise above this mood. Only all the carelessness and combativeness and pleasure-seeking have gone out of him."

He murmured incoherent sentences which showed how completely he had let go of things: "All action is a mistake; patriotism also is a mistake. All men are good, only we cannot reach all. . . . Who am I that I should teach any more?"

For a week, Nivedita looked after him as best she could. He spent most of his time alone on the deck of his houseboat, meditating, but when they met he transferred to her a tremendous force of energy, which she could convert into action with the freedom she had just found. Just before she went away, he said to her:

"We are one part of a rhythm, you and I, that is larger than we know of. God make us worthy of our place."

## *16. At the Feet of Sarada Devi*

NIVEDITA ARRIVED alone in Calcutta, and went straight from the railroad station to the house of Sri Sarada Devi at Bagh Bazar. Before she started her work she wanted to confide in this woman who was called "Mother" and venerated like a saint, and who had welcomed her so generously on her previous visit, when she had called in the company of her American friends. She had no idea of the audacity and unconventionality of her action in thus arriving uninvited, like a daughter coming to her mother's house.

She was, in fact, transgressing all caste rules, and she provoked a veritable panic among the brahman women who lived with Sri Ma. Gopeler Ma, who was nearly eighty, and who had been so kind before, was violent in her opposition to Nivedita's entering the household. Swami Vivekananda, who was then staying in Calcutta, came to carry on tactful negotiations. By the end of the day it was arranged that a vacant corner in the house should be set aside for the foreign disciple. Then, when she found herself with Sri Ma face to face, Nivedita forgot all this punctiliousness and social embarrassment; and as a matter of fact her coming brought about no change whatever in the household routine.

At night, a narrow mattress, a pillow, and a blanket were set on a fiber mat on the floor, next to those of the other women. By day, she was immersed in the meditative calm she had longed for. At the feet of Sarada Devi, she was to lead a life of worship and austerity.

In this place which a simple discipline had transformed into an actual convent, all the women's worldly possessions—little more than a sari or two, a comb, perhaps a sacred book—were kept in small steel trunks lined against the wall. On the evening of her arrival Nivedita draped herself in a white sari, for the first time, and covered her head. But she lay awake all that night. She could not rest on the hard floor. She was cold under her blanket. She listened for sounds to people her solitude: the rustle of a lizard on the wall, the singing of a cricket under the roof. She heard the watchman pass at the set quarters of the night, chanting his prayer. She breathed in rhythm with her companions, those sleeping women swathed in veils from head to foot. And she thought of her old school dormitory at Halifax: how different this was!

A little before four o'clock every woman got up, one after the other, and sat on the edge of her pallet, her beads in her hands, her face covered and turned to the wall. Two hours passed without the slightest further movement from anyone. At dawn, one of the women rose and stretched herself; this was the signal for activity. Mats and mattresses were rolled up, the floor was swept and scrubbed, the clatter of cooking utensils was heard, and the smell of cooking filled the house. The women who had taken shower baths came back in clean saris. They chattered and laughed, now, like little girls.

After a hurried breakfast, one of the women began to massage Sri Ma's legs. The others, like workers in a hive, cleaned and scoured the premises. When one of them brought in a basket of flowers, all movement ceased and voices fell silent. Every woman brought her small grass mat and sat down in her usual place. The day's program of worship was beginning.

The entire morning was an act of devotion, in this room whose walls were cracking with damp. At one end an opened door showed a second room, with a niche in which two dimly lit shrines bore identical photographs of Sri Ramakrishna. The larger altar had a golden dais, the smaller was adorned with garlands of flowers. In front were ranged the household gods of the women: the lingam of Shiva in black stone, the statuette

of Krishna the divine flute-player, the statuette also of Sarasvati standing on a half-open lotus flower and of Durga seated on a lion with a bristling mane: there was also Jagaddhatri, to whom Sarada had paid homage since her childhood.

The puja ceremony proceeded slowly, celebrated by one of the women and punctuated by offerings of food and flowers, amid the smoke of incense and the blinking of oil lamps. Some of the worshippers seemed absorbed in their individual meditations, others were reciting favorite hymns; every now and then they would prostrate themselves, their foreheads touching the ground. Over to one side, two of them were celebrating a special service; before them was a copper vase full of water, and some mango leaves. Bells, noisy and discordant, were rung throughout the proceedings. When the worship was ended, the woman who had officiated marked each of the others' foreheads with red paste; one by one, then, they prostrated themselves before the shrine, and went and laid their heads at the feet of Saradi Devi. She blessed them and caressed them with a mother's tenderness, to encourage them on the narrow path of renunciation.

After this, Nivedita sat with the other women beside Sri Ma and tried to enter into the silence that was being built up around her: a silence composed of the individual silences of all these women, each of them now repeating on her beads her *mantra*—the seed word of their soul. At first she relaxed in the encircling calm; then her thoughts began to seek images, objects of reflection; she felt at ease until her body, held motionless, became stiff and hurt her. She changed her position, but from that moment she was so dominated by the wild desire for movement and sound that the all-pervading peace around her became an absolute torture. The continuing silence required such a nervous effort from her that she covered her face to hide her tense features. Suddenly one of the women placed a glass of water beside her. Had she guessed her trouble? Nivedita drank greedily. "When will silence bring a blessing for me?" she prayed. This long exercise in concentration lasted until it was time for the main meal of the day, at about eleven o'clock.

This was served after Sri Ma had offered it to Sri Ramakrishna, thus making it a sacrament to be shared by all; it consisted of rice and vegetable curry set on copper trays. During this time of pleasant relaxation Nivedita would have liked to question her companions, but the women felt ill at ease with this foreigner who during the silent meals kept asking, "Why?" When one lives beyond Maya, confronted only with oneself, can any questions be asked? One of the women said to her, "How can you still have any doubt about anything, when the Mother is here?"

When the afternoon siesta was over, Sri Ma's door was opened to visitors, and women would come from the town to receive her *darshan*—the blessing that is granted when one sees a saint. She would lay her hands on a child, rebuke a young wife, give advice and instruction to all. Her mysterious power of calming troubled minds, and of radiating peace, made her room a sanctuary. "How many times during the day do you utter God's name?" she would ask. "The mind will be steady if one says the name of God. Repeat it fifteen or twenty thousand times a day, then you will know peace. It is truly so. I myself have experienced it. One forgets God so easily!"

Twice a week Sarada Devi received men visitors, for the most part the "sons" of Sri Ramakrishna. Veiled from head to foot, she meditated with them. Neither Swami Vivekananda nor any of the older monks ever saw her face. If a man asked advice, she replied by whispering her answer to an elderly woman who transmitted the message. Her intuition took her into the very hearts of her disciples and made it possible for her to understand the most complicated situations, but any exaggerated sentimentality made her somewhat ironical. Writing of the household, its mistress and its customs, in a letter to Nell Hammond, Nivedita commented: "All this does not sound very sensible; yet this woman is said to be the very soul of practicality and common sense, as she certainly gives every token of being to those who know her even slightly. Sri Ramakrishna always consulted her before undertaking anything, and her advice is always acted upon by his disciples."



When there were no visitors, or after they had all gone, Sarada Devi's room would be filled with a lighthearted gaiety. Yogin Ma, the most learned of the women, would tell stories from the *Puranas*, and then these would be acted out as plays. Lakshmi Didi, a widow who was still very young, had the favorite roles of Krishna and Radha. A musician in the group played the *cithar* and sang. These diversions continued until a servant brought in a lighted oil lamp. The cry of the conch shell and the bells could be heard far away. It was time for the evening worship.

Nivedita was always to call this hour "the hour of peace," and describe it often in her writings. A lamp with several wicks was waved before each picture, prayers were recited and songs sung. As twilight fell, the wind rose in the palm trees, and the birds began their evening chorus. Under Sri Ma's direction the women devoted this hour to deep meditation, pure individual worship, a fervent and absolute submission. Several women went up to the roof, and with their faces turned toward the north prayed there long into the night. Sarada Devi kept Nivedita by her side, to give her confidence. Nivedita explained later: "A tremendous dynamic power emanated from Sarada Devi, while she remained completely absorbed within herself. She touched upon the very heart of life." During these moments, Nivedita experienced, as far as she was able, the mystic impulses which her guru had known on the road to Amarnath. One evening she felt tears running down her cheeks, tears of joy. . . .

Now, like the other women, while meditating she lowered her sari over her face so as to keep within her the blinding light she perceived, and lived without speech, without motion, in a divine state of grace. "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour. . . ." With her body relaxed and her mind quiet, she discovered an intense joy which she had never thought existed.

Swami Swarupananda's lessons in Almora, and the advice of some old monk on the road to Amarnath, now came back to her. She cultivated those moments of warm quietude when the

mind, in obedience to definite laws, falls asleep, and when the body no longer exists. Her concentration on a given point had now become a reality.

Nivedita lived thus with Sri Ma for a fortnight. Her life was that of the mother, her breath was in that of the mother, her gestures were those of submission to the mother. All this serenity provided the background where she forged the weapons for her future life.

One evening, as Sri Ma was about to get up, Nivedita came and laid her head at the mother's feet. Saranda placed her hand on her head, and for a long time stroked that determined brow as she blessed her.

"Now," she said, "your work is about to begin. . . ."

Although Sarada rarely left her house, she knew everything that went on in the district. Almost next door there was a house which had been empty for some days, and which now was to be Nivedita's abode. It was modest and simple, just like every other house in that lane. It had solid walls and a massive roof, to keep out the monsoon. The rent was negligible. Swami Yogananda, Sri Ma's guardian, made himself responsible for all the negotiations.

When Nivedita first visited her future home, she saw all the women of the nearby houses standing in their doorways. Gopaler Ma, the brahman woman who had opposed the foreigner's entry into Sarada Devi's household, now took Nivedita ostentatiously by the hand and said to the neighbors, "Here is a child of Sri Ma who is going to live with us. May the Lord bless her." Stout and active, in spite of her age, she walked with tiny steps, and was very pleased to be initiating Nivedita into the life of Bagh Bazar.

The house, number 16 Bose Para Lane, was cold and damp inside. Two young servants were brushing and scrubbing and throwing pails of water over the red tiles. Nivedita continued to sleep in Sri Saranda's "dormitory" for a few days longer, and then moved into her new home. Her personal workroom was furnished with two very large tables of white wood, a chair, and a stool. A built-in bookshelf held her Indian books, and,

next to them, her Bible studies, Bowden's *Imitation of Buddha*, the *Discourses of Epictetus*, and selections from Renan; there were also biographies, a wide assortment—Emerson, Thoreau, Joan of Arc, Saint Louis, Pericles, Alexander the Great, Saladin. On the wall hung her ivory crucifix and a single picture: the "Annunciation," with the Virgin holding the broken lilies in her arms.

An old serving-woman was in charge of the kitchen, and she went off at once, with a few small coins, in search of a "stove." She came back with three tiles, three small bars of iron, and some mud, with which she built the traditional hearth. She also bought two earthenware pots for boiling water and rice. Although Nivedita was half her age, she addressed the old woman as "*ghi*"—"my daughter"—while the servant called her "mother." These symbolical names set the first seal on the new family. And, several days later, Nivedita wrote to her friends:

My home is, in my eyes, charming. It is a rambling specimen of the true old Hindu style of building, with its courtyard a great well of coolness and, at night, a playground of merry breezes. Who would not love a house with such a courtyard, with its limited second story, and with its quaintly terraced roof built at five different levels? Here at dawn and sunset, or in the moonlight, one can feel alone with the whole universe. The lane is quite clean, and charmingly irregular. First on one side and then on the other, it gives a twist. There is a tree growing in the middle of a tiny crossroads and making traffic impossible. The neighboring houses are low-built and huddled together, with their thatched roofs sloping down into the road. Everywhere the happy laughter of children in the sunlight, everywhere the flutter of newly washed drapery hung out to dry, everywhere a cow or two wandering about. After a hot day, the lane is deep in slumber; the walls are burning hot; the setting sun drinks up, in a reddish glow, the moisture exuded by the plaster, and prepares nests for the lizards.

The house's only luxury was a sweet-basil plant in a glazed earthenware pot, set in the doorway.

## 17. *Zenana*

NIVEDITA HAD glimpses of her guru while she was staying with Sri Ma. He had certainly recognized her beneath her veil, but, respecting Hindu custom, he had neither spoken to her nor looked at her. Now he came to call upon her in her home.

She received him, not on the doorstep, but inside the house. For the first time she was wearing the full white robe of Kashmir wool which she was never again to abandon in India—such a habit as a nun might have worn, simple and straight, with a cord at the waist. Swami Vivekananda noticed the sparsely furnished rooms with their whitewashed walls. He smiled at the only signs of indulgence—a teapot and some delicate china cups on a tray—but it was plain that she had really settled down to a monastic existence. Her look was clear and steady. He noticed at once how she had changed.

The Swami was making this first visit to his Western disciple's house in order to ask her obedience to the only rule he thought necessary, a rule of whose consequences Nivedita was entirely ignorant—the closing of her dwelling according to the regulations of the Hindu *Zenana*. This was an essential condition of life among the orthodox Hindu women of that time, and Vivekananda, who had never before dictated to Nivedita, was at pains to make her understand the spirit that lay behind the rule.

What it meant in practice was that the building, with the exception of the ground-floor rooms which were to house the school, became a *zenana*: no man (not even her guru), no for-

eign woman (not even her friends), could cross the threshold beyond the reception room next to the front door. No sound from outside was allowed to trouble the spirit of voluntary renunciation which held sway within. It was a monastic life which was the necessary yogi discipline for the transformation of the soul in an inner solitude. Swami Vivekananda in no way restricted Nivedita's public life; on the contrary, he helped her to widen and deepen it. But he watched her closely. Twice within two months he upbraided her severely when she relaxed the rule of zenana in order to entertain Swami Abhayananda, an American sannyasini and disciple of her guru. And several months later he was to make her training even stricter, saying to her, "Now you must give up all visiting, and live in strict seclusion."

For the moment, Swami Vivekananda substituted the assimilation of the probationer rules in Christian convents for the life of the high-caste Hindu widow. He gave little advice, but what he did give assumed the importance of strict regulations. These, however, controlled Nivedita only from the outside. For the rest, she was left face to face with herself.

"Realize yourself without a trace of emotion," he directed. "Control every restlessness of the mind, every expression of your face."

He also made her study *The Imitation of Christ*, which he had learned by heart in his youth, and which had quickened his ambition to found a monastic order. To achieve the discipline that was demanded of her, Nivedita spent hours in her white cell, until she could silence every thought that was not divine.

The conventual rules which she accepted meant, likewise, that her house was now closely connected with the Belur monastery and was under the custody of one of the monks, who was to come and live there permanently, as Swami Yogananda did in Sarada Devi's antechamber. For this post, Swami Vivekananda had chosen his earliest disciple, Swami Sadananda, in whom he had every confidence. This monk was especially well fitted for co-operating with Nivedita, because he had in his youth heard of the ideas of Sufism and had received a military

training, and both these offered specific means of aiding her in her work.

The presence of this strictly disciplined monk was of immense help to Nivedita. He slept in a room which opened independently near the front entrance; he worked and ate his meals alone there; he looked after the plants; and as he worked he sang, joyfully, in a beautiful voice, "My Lord, I love Thee, I adore Thee." In the evening he insisted that Nivedita should stop her work and come down to the courtyard, and then he would tell her the wonderful stories of the *Ramayana* which he had learned from his aunt, an illiterate woman who had heard them in her village temple:

"And the holy pilgrimage continued. The hermit Vishva-mitra led off the two young princes, Rama and his brother, to see King Janaka, who reigned in the country of Mithila. He had a marvelous bow. He who could bend it would win the hand of his daughter Sita, a princess born of the earth, sprung from a furrow while he was ploughing a field. The mighty bow lay in a chariot which five thousand men could scarcely move. Rama came forward, lifted it up with ease, and bent it till it broke. Then gifts were heaped upon the brahmans and the people; according to the rites, Rama and Sita turned seven times around the sacred fire and thus were wedded. In their spotless union they resembled Vishnu, chief of Immortals, and his wife, Sri. . . ."

There were also tales from the *Mahabharata*, in which powerful warriors, sages, kings and queens, demons, and nymphs took part in dazzling episodes. Bhishma, the Indian King Arthur, with matchless purity of soul, enacted his epic of chivalry; Lancelot appeared in the person of the young King Yudhishthira, accompanying Krishna, the Indian Christ, prince and leader of men. Nivedita asked questions as a child would have done. She relived these stories which she wanted one day to recount herself. Every little detail had a meaning for her: Why did they pour melted butter on the shrine? Why did they smear the gods' heads with red?

Sadananda answered these questions untiringly, so that she

might learn the religious rites and customs of India at the same time as she was entering the contemplative life; and he guided her to relaxation through sacred history.

The swirling movement of life in Bagh Bazar came right to Nivedita's door. Through Sri Ma's disciples she had learned the names of all the women of the neighborhood, and through Swami Sadananda, whom they invited to share their meals, she learned all that went on in their homes. He knew all the children, all the shopkeepers, the beggars, and the riverside folk, both fishermen and idlers. He spoke to them all of the "white sister" as being one of ourselves, so that when she walked with him in the street the women exclaimed, "She must certainly be a brahman in her own country."

There was nothing in Bagh Bazar that might recall the West to Nivedita's mind. Although it was only a mile or so from the center of Calcutta, she never met any Europeans here. The mid-town district was reached by a crowded and noisy exotic thoroughfare, the Chitpur Road. With its horse-drawn double-decker tram cars, it was one of the city's main traffic arteries: Nivedita liked to dawdle along the avenue and its side streets, buying fruits and vegetables. The Chitpur Road first sweeps through the labyrinthine Chinese quarter where men and urchins, with eyes shaded, beat hides on the pavement and in the alleyways where the streets run with greasy smelly water. In their poky shops cobblers tap with their hammers beneath hanging bundles of sandals. The road then widens to take in an important white mosque flanked with baskets full of ironmongery and surrounded with ice-cream and sweetmeat sellers. Here also are piles of watermelons sold by the slice, and of coconuts which once emptied of their milk and tossed into the gutter belong to cows and goats. Veiled Moslem women go furtively by, hugging the walls, while their menfolk, square-bearded and carrying amber beads, strut about in their striped shirts. A little further on, Chitpur Road is given over to Persians and Afghans and money-changers housed under large parasols. India proper begins with the viol- and vina-makers' corporation which invades the street on both sides with rows of tampuras, lutes and cymbals

laid out in murky shops hung with white sheets. Embroidery-sellers and vendors of saris and copper goods occupy the next stretch of road; then come the confectioners sitting behind piles of cakes covered with glass covers to be followed by the florists, making up their garlands of tuberose, roses, and camphor beads.

Here, where Nivedita enjoyed lingering, every crossroads was a village in itself, with its own temple, and its own life that was concentrated in the hovels and the trellised arbors and walks where clothes hung drying. There was the uninhibited screaming of women's voices, the yelping of children. The opium vendor and the betel-leaf merchant had their booths next to the den of the charm-seller. Inside this last, there were baskets full of toads, salamanders, leeches, and cobras, and curious trophies hung on the walls—the skins of fish and crocodiles, knotty walking-sticks, scissors, dried herbs. . . .

The crowd swarmed past. It stopped for a moment about a tall tree encircled with a grille. There passers-by were worshipping the enormous vermilion-painted head of an elephant-god. The men mounted the three stone steps, rang the bell which hung from one of the branches, and came away again. The women laid small white cakes on the shrine and touched the ground with their foreheads, having first lifted their children to caress the feet of the God. "Blessed be Thou, Ganesha, guardian of our souls, who dost pardon and rescue Thy children from ignorance; accompany us each step we take!"

One day, during the siesta hour, Nivedita walked down the whole of Chitpur Road. The deserted street was asleep, given up entirely to the sacred bulls which went by lolling their huge heads from side to side. Herds of goats were rooting about the midden heaps. The street vendors were stretched out in sleep on the pavement, the wealthiest on string-cots. A few old women passed, bent in two like shadows fleeing the light. Nivedita fled too, but only from the drowsy heat, happy to feel the deep thrill of contact with the people she had made her own. She felt so vividly that they belonged to her that she could have shouted, "I am each one of you, you passers-by! The dust which wearies your body burns mine too, my fingers bleed like yours with hard



work, my back is broken under the weight of the water that you carry. But I am happy, living here. Passer-by, teach me to smile at my *Ishta* (the personal image of God), as you do in your humble life!"

. . . But it was the appeal of death, as it turned out, that won all hearts to Nivedita, and that admitted her to intimacy with the women of Bagh Bazar.

One evening a woman burst into the house, calling out, "Come quickly! Our youngest daughter is dying!" The child lay in an earthen hut on the other side of the street, and she died just as Nivedita entered. The mother, who was very young, was sobbing, beside herself with grief, clutching the little body in her arms. For an hour, two hours, Nivedita cradled her on her knees, stroked the tear-stained face, whispered words of divine comfort, until the mother at last became quiet and loosed her grasp on her dead child. Early next morning Nivedita set off for Belur, to tell her guru about this first meeting with death.

"These poor people were asking for the same assurance we all seek," she said, "the knowledge that their child was at peace, in the loving care of the Divine Mother, and that all is joy in the 'eternity' of time. We lived together the same suffering, then we were lulled by the same confidence. There was no barrier between us, no difference of ideal or creed. Toward morning the older woman brought me some food before I left."

Swami Vivekananda listened with the greatest interest. "That is why Sri Ramakrishna came into the world," he told her, "to say with his courage that we were to talk to all men in their own language. . . . Love Death, Margot, worship the Terrible! God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Death is nothing but the displacement of the center from one point to another. Seek life in death and death in life. Margot, worship the Terrible!"

These words were still echoing in her ears when, several days later, as she passed Sri Ma's house, she saw a crowd of people reciting prayers. She went into the house at once. She had known that Swami Yogananda was very ill, nearing death, but she had not expected the end to come so soon. When the Eng-

lish doctor had said that nothing more could be done for him, he had received the news with a smile, and he had continued to serve Sri Ma as long as any strength remained.

Most of the monks of Belur were standing about the dying man's bed. Upstairs the women were weeping. Yogananda was the first of Sri Ramakrishna's sons in religion to meet death, and he met it in full consciousness and with a welcoming faith. The crowd waited in the street until the time came to accompany his body to the cremation ground on the banks of the Ganges, where Swami Brahmananda, in his office as abbot, performed the last rites and set the torch to the funeral pyre. Swami Vivekananda was suffering from severe attacks of asthma at this time, and had not left his room at Belur. Would *his* body be abandoned to the flames one day, Nivedita was asking herself? She shuddered at the thought, and stopped up her ears so as not to hear the crackling of the burning wood. She still could not welcome death.

When she saw the monks going off together she experienced a moment of revolt. Why was she alone in her suffering? They lived in a community, sustained by a common effort. Their combined solitudes were a force on which they could rely. Nivedita struggled with herself until evening; it took her some time to shake off her fit of depression. "I seem to be failing pretty badly in a great many ways," she groaned. "Never mind liberation. . . . Who am I that I should lay up anything to my credit? I should be quite content if I could come true to Swamiji in some one thing. . . . If I could only keep in his shadow, and never get across the edge of it. . . ."

When she had shaken off her sadness she still needed soothing, like a hurt child. She went up to Sri Ma's room and sat near her, in silence, her veil well down over her face. Sarada Devi, worn by her mourning for her lost "son," was exhausted, too. She felt Nivedita's misery, and guessed the cause. She caressed her hands gently, and seemed to be saying to her, "I, too, have greatly loved. . . ."

"Once Sri Ramakrishna came to spend six months in his village," she said. "He was ill. I was fourteen years old. I served

him tenderly during all this time, in the midst of his radiant poverty. How good he was to me! In the evening, under a mango tree, he taught me to read. He taught me all the things in Nature. I lived entirely for him. But later, when the time time, he told me, 'You must live now on your own, face to face with yourself. . . .'

Before she left the room, Nivedita came and laid her head on the mother's lap. "Love your guru," the holy woman said, smiling. "Love him infinitely. All the love you bear a perfectly pure being will regenerate your soul; it is the love of the disciple for his Lord. Pure love is the light of the soul. . . . Hush! Listen to what I say to you in silence. Your love for Swamiji is like the love I bore Sri Ramakrishna. . . ."

Nivedita went back to her home, calm, with confidence restored.

## 18. *The Choice*

WHEN THE premises at Belur were completed and the monastery was dedicated in December, 1899, the Ramakrishna Mission comprised about fifty monks and novices, without counting the lay workers. Swami Vivekananda, in recognition of this entity, had drawn up in detail the monastic regulations of his Order in regard to spiritual exercises, food, study, and work. To introduce innovations into the social life of India, to gather together in a single community under a single and simple rule Shivaite, Shakta, Ramaist, Vaishnavite, Christian, and Sufi monks—this was a tremendous hazard. If the spirit of unity lay in devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, who had shown by his life that all paths were equally valid for obtaining the ultimate truth, the daily round in the monastery was the law of life which Swami Vivekananda laid down. He wanted his work to rest upon a sure basis, and not to remain a series of concessions to the feeblehearted.

His own health was far from good. He came back from Kashmir in a worse condition than when he had gone there. Repeated attacks of asthma left him sleepless and exhausted. He had moments of deep depression when his physical powers failed him. But some landlords who were among his disciples placed a houseboat on the Ganges at his disposal, so that he might benefit from the river breezes during the night; and the best doctors were always on call.

Money was short; but he had been in worse situations. The

monastery was in existence. Now he had to mold the characters of the monks, create traditions, be ready to send them forth when he deemed the time had come. While he sent out the most reliable of his monks to blaze new trails, he kept his novices under his own strict authority, and entrusted Swami Brahmananda only with their spiritual instruction. He supervised every activity. Nothing escaped him. He sought to make his monks strong and courageous as well as receptive and obedient, until a spirit of renunciation through action should be firmly secured.

Swami Vivekananda used his authority to break down resistance, smooth out passion, transform natural tendencies. What purity lay in the look of those novices who had become useful tools in his hands! Sometimes he would summon one of them and keep him by day and night, forging an intimate relationship in which every hour provided enlightenment.

He showed the same solicitude for, and required the same obedience from, Nivedita. He knew her every reaction. The more she allowed herself to be guided by him in spiritual solitude, the more he laid those tasks upon her for which he judged her ready; but he wished these to be fulfilled without effort and without enthusiasm, in perfect balance. He did not even allow her to speak of them, or to look at him with the slightest trace of self-satisfaction or pride of achievement in her eyes. This impersonal attitude was perhaps the most difficult for her to acquire, and during the five months of active service in her probation time—between October, 1898 and March, 1899—she floundered often.

In November, she opened her school. It was part of the plan for the women's convent which the Swami hoped to establish.

Twice a week she went to Belur to give lessons to the monks, in physiology, botany, and practical pedagogy. Her pupils sat around her in a circle as if they were listening to a pandit discussing the *Shastras*. Then after a short break she would help the monks in their more difficult tasks of sewing. Swami Vivekananda was opposed to any hierarchy in their work, and he expected each of them to perform the humblest duties, so as to

be entirely independent. This teaching of the dignity of labor was the great novelty in the monastery's discipline, a liberation from the order established by the castes, which divided all toil on a basis of birth. Vivekananda forbade any monk to employ a servant. Every one had to wash and mend his own clothes.

At five o'clock, when her lessons were finished, Nivedita would go up to the terrace onto which Swami Vivekananda's room opened, and where, stretched out on a mattress, he worked. A few monks would be sitting about, at low tables, taking down his dictation. Nivedita waited for her share of the European mail. She read out the latest letters from Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod, who had left India in January. After this exchange of news, the conversation took a more serious turn and was confined to matters of work. With a kind of ironic pathos the Swami, incapable of movement himself, goaded Nivedita to action.

"Never complain of not having enough time for prayer and meditation," he said to her. "Your mission and your achievement lie in your work. That is the goal to which I am leading you. You must unite within yourself the practical spirit and culture of the perfect citizen, with love of poverty, purity, and complete abandonment of self. Those are the condition under which your faith will blossom. Reveal your unlimited power after you yourself have completely renounced it. Until you are capable of this, mortify yourself, in order to find strength. A stern *tapasya* [austerity] will discipline you! But make haste! Follow me. March with me. My mission is not Ramakrishna's, nor Vedanta's, nor anything but simply to bring manhood to this people."

"I will help you, Swami," she answered.

"I know it," he said.

"Perhaps you will understand my people better than anyone," the Swami once said. "The Bengali and the Irish are races after the same pattern. They only talk and talk, and play with high-sounding words. These two peoples excel in grandiloquence, but they are incapable of doing anything when it comes to real practical work. Besides, they will spend all their

time barking at each other and tearing each other to pieces. The English are right in criticizing us. To raise the standards of the masses, we must educate them. It is only thus that we can build a nation. Our task is to assemble the elements. The crystallization will take place according to divine laws. Let us get these ideas into the heads of the people; they will do the rest themselves. It is not easy to educate the masses. A poverty-stricken government can do little. We must act individually. Let us be brave! A handful of strong men can stir the world!

"And your own work among the women is important," he continued. "Stir them up! The manhood of Europe was kept up by the women who hated unmanliness. When will Bengali girls play their part and drown in merciless ridicule every display of feebleness on the part of men?"

His thoughts and ideas poured forth in a torrent. But he was pitifully ill. Miss MacLeod had invited him to come to the United States, and all his doctors agreed that a long sea voyage would restore his health. Nivedita begged him to accept the invitation, and the Swami would agree to the idea; but as soon as he had some slight return of strength he would refuse to go. Events, moreover, were against him. There was a return of bubonic plague. This time he was ready for it and had prepared several of his monks for action. In the previous year the people of Bagh Bazar had seen the monks organizing a quarantine camp and taking care of the sick. Now they had confidence in Swami Vivekananda, and he had been able to improve relations between the government and the population that was angered by health measures which ran counter to caste laws.

With the return of the plague, Swami Vivekananda relied for practical aid upon two monks, and Nivedita.

"We must save the district," he said to her. "It is for you to do this. We must have sweepers; we need men for that work. We are about to organize a special meeting, in the Town Hall, which will shake the people out of their apathy. You will speak. I will take the chair. I want all the students of Calcutta to come out and clean up the Bagh Bazar locality with their own hands. I want them to have 'death fever'—do you know what

that is? I was talking to my own boys all day yesterday, and they are just like hounds hot on the scent."

The scourge threatened panic throughout the city. It was said that one hundred people were dying every day. More and more cases broke out. Everything was lacking: medicines, vaccines, nurses. Against this visitation, in these conditions, Nivedita fought an implacable war. She went through the stricken localities, making inquiries; prepared lists of vacant beds; opened a provisional dispensary in a wooden shed; organized groups of volunteer workers under the direction of Swami Sadananda. Her campaign was pursued so vigorously that the government Health Officer, with his inspectors, came to see her. He expected to be received by a committee, but was met instead by one harassed woman sitting at a desk covered with papers, while little Hindu children played all around her.

"We will save Bagh Bazar," she said. "There is no doubt about that. The effort comes from the people and is for the people. The first subscription in a single street brought in two hundred and thirty-five rupees. My assistants are monks who have become scavengers. They work eighteen hours a day, and offer their work to God."

The students organized themselves into teams, making collections and distributing disinfectants to the houses. Did they realize the special nature of their apprenticeship to the national cause? Nivedita gave them a new conception of civic life in the very practice of their self-sacrifice.

"A sweeper who accomplishes his work through an ideal," she explained, "is ready for an even greater ideal. What will that ideal be? It is for you to find out. By saving Bagh Bazar, we are writing the history of India with life itself; this history has never been written. This is our *Ramayana*."

When she spoke of India, she said "we." The word came naturally to her lips now.

The sanitary conditions of the lanes around Bose Para Lane came under her direct supervision. She had given the women wicker baskets, and she never went out without making sure that they kept the roadway clean right up to the gutter and threw



their rubbish into these receptacles. Even this measure had been difficult to enforce. The women had failed to see the connection between keeping the lanes clean and the fight against the plague. They had listened and smiled, but that was all. Nivedita had argued with them for two days, and then, on the third day, had given up the struggle and gone out well before dawn to sweep the lanes herself. When the women saw her, bent double over her short-handled brush, they first hid in shame in their houses and then began to talk with one another. By evening the news had spread all through the neighborhood:

"If we don't sweep the lanes, the Sister will do it."

That had been enough!

The struggle against the epidemic went on, in unspeakable heat, for thirty days. Nivedita gave herself no rest until the plague subsided; then, dropping with exhaustion, she sought refuge at the feet of her guru. It was he, now, who tenderly looked after her. He made her rest, and even supervised her diet so as to speed the return of strength. For three weeks she remained prostrate at the Belur guesthouse, haunted by the visions of death that had found place in her subconscious mind; one eight-year-old boy had died clinging to her dress and calling "Mother, Mother!" Why couldn't she have saved him? she kept thinking. . . . Her love had sought to snatch him from death. But—that was how she had fallen into the trap of revolting against death. Now that her guru explained it to her, she saw it clearly.

It was because she had just passed through the great ordeal of sacrifice through love that he could now ask her—in her weakness, which rendered her doubly receptive—to make a new renunciation. He described in greater detail the ideal of work which had to be attained.

"Learn to conceive the work which supersedes love," he said to her, "the work which is the love of God in the joy of His creation. . . ."

When the guru finished speaking, darkness had fallen. Several monks had come in and sat down around them.

A clear voice, which seemed quite impersonal, suddenly broke the silence.

"Swamiji, I should like to pronounce my final vows," Nivedita said.

He replied to this voice: "Sri Ramakrishna is waiting for you."

How simple it was!

That very evening—on the 12th of March, 1899—Nivedita wrote to her friend Nell Hammond:

The King said "Yes" when I asked him to make me a "member for life" on Saturday the 25th. He said he had done likewise for two young men yesterday morning. I wish there were the least chance of your knowing in time. It will be just a year since my first initiation.

## 19. *The Vows for Life*

NIVEDITA PRONOUNCED her final vows on the appointed day.

Her probation time had been very short. It had merely served to increase her desire for obedience and to foster in her that spirit of renunciation which was essential for a formal Brahmacharya. To prepare for it, Nevidita had schooled herself in the ascetic routine of a Christian convent: rising before dawn, meditation during the night, continuous fasting which allowed only one meal a day. The real austerity lay in the regularity of this discipline. She had no difficulty in submitting her thoughts to a rigid and constant mental analysis, and in remaining steadfast in an attitude of contemplation. She had learned the mechanism of complete submission, but all these exercises had only led to mental austerity.

She had reached the point where all that had been absolute certainty before seemed now but a shadowy beginning. She was entering the stage of a more detailed renunciation and here outside help was of little use to her. The guru, her friend and guide, gradually withdrew from her as she became more and more conscious within her own soul of the "guru of gurus." All the energy she had acquired from the discipline she had been taught was to be transformed into energy to work in the service of man.

One day Swami Vivekananda had said to her: "Remember, worship is a school or preparation for higher stages of spiritual development." She remembered this when the moment came for her to worship with him.

Nivedita was aware of these things intellectually, but humility had taught her merely to be a tool in the hands of her guru and to obey his every word.

She herself described the extremely simple ceremony which took place:

Yesterday, just a year after my first initiation, I was made a *Naishtik Brahmacharini*. [*A title which gave her for life the dignity of a nun.*]

I reached the Math at 8 o'clock, and went to the Chapel. There we sat on the floor, and, till the flowers came for worship, the King\* talked to me of Buddha. Wasn't that a beautiful note to strike then? He repeated the ideal, once accepted, which is always the same: not liberation but renunciation; not self-realization but self-abandonment.

Then all the things were brought, and he taught me to make puja. At last, you see, he gave me my long-desired lesson in performing the worship of Shiva. We did it together; and he chanted away so sweetly all the time, just like the dearest of mothers teaching a young child in a sweet way. The puja ended with salutations to *avatars*. [*The incantations of Godhead on earth.*]

When I had decorated the shrine with flowers, he said, "And now give some to my Buddha; no one here likes him but me!" As if addressing in one person every separate soul that would ever come to him for guidance, he blessed me: "Go thou and follow Him who was born and gave his life for others five hundred times before he attained the Blessed Vision of the Buddha!"

When the puja was over we went downstairs to make the fire sacrifice.

Nivedita was now to pronounce, before the monks, the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience which would bind her forever, sacrificing in the flames of the *vedic homa* all that she was giving up. The ritual offerings of pure butter, flowers, fruits, milk, leaves, and seeds were thrown on the fire while the

\* As will have been noticed in earlier letters, Nivedita referred thus to her guru in intimate correspondence and conversation.

monks repeated in chorus the prayers and invocations that were spoken by the officiant. For Nivedita the prayer arose: "He who masters all passion, all lust, all anger, all jealousy, all hatred, and sees the Divine in every man, lives but for the ideal of purity, charity, nonviolence, and truth. He meditates, concentrates his mind on God, and is a living offering."

When Nivedita rose, after lying prostrate before her guru, he marked her forehead, and also those of all the monks present, with ashes. But this time they were the ashes of her own life.

Nivedita stood up, sanctified.

A monk sang:

"O thou Fire, symbol of immortal purity,  
O trees, emblems of all life,  
O heavens, beholders of the silence of God,  
I call ye, O my guru, to witness  
That on this blazing pyre  
I cast down everything that is earthly in me,  
With this Ego itself  
Consume me, O Fire,  
Until nothing is left of me.

*Hari Om tat sat! Hari Om tat sat!"*

One by one the monks withdrew. One of them, advanced in years, looked upon the dying fire and toward the new Brahma-charini. He passed close by her and touched her feet to mark his respect and greeting.

Nivedita stayed at the monastery that day. After luncheon Swami Vivekananda called her, and kept her by him for two hours. She now wore over her white robe the string of *rudrakshas*—a rosary of sacred seeds. Her soul was singing thanksgivings to her guru for the radiant peace that he had given her. She felt purified of all suffering. She was love without servitude, reached beyond the ocean of fears, in the haven of the Spiritual Vision.

Swami Vivekananda guessed her thoughts, and answered them: "Mind you, Margot, it is when half-a-dozen people learn to love like this that a new religion begins—not till then. I always remember the woman who went in the morning to the

entrance of the Sepulchre; and as she stood there she heard a voice, and thought it was the gardener. Then Jesus touched her, and she turned around, and all she could say was, 'My Lord and my God. . . .' The person had gone. Give me half a dozen disciples like that, and I will conquer the world."

That evening, before she went to bed, Nivedita wrote the prayer of her heart and sent it to her friend Yum (Miss MacLeod):\*

Thou who art the Energy, give me energy;

Thou who art the Strength, give me strength!

Make me strong like the thunderbolt;

Give me strength to keep my vow of purity for life!

Then she added, in her letter: "I fancy he made me a Brahmacharini for life partly for the sake of reviving the old order of Naishtik and partly because I am not really ready for anything higher in his eyes. And indeed I should like to come fully prepared to the other if I ever do."

She dated the letter, *Feast of the Annunciation, 25th March, 1899*. To meet God face to face, Nivedita had chosen that day above all days. She had welcomed the divine Nuncio, and repeated the song of joy: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, be it done unto me according to His holy will."

- \* "Yum" is the Tibetan name for the feminine principle of energy, and was familiarly given to Miss MacLeod by Swami Vivekananda and by Nivedita.

## 20. *The School for Girls*

FOUR MONTHS before this, on the 12th of November, 1898 (the Feast of Kali), Nivedita had opened her school.

Its first pupils were three puny and timid little Hindu girls. Its financial capital was eight hundred rupees, just enough to tide it over the first months. Its schedule of lessons was entirely irregular, since the children did not come at set hours. Even its plans were not definitely formed. "Let yourself be guided. You are going to learn everything from your pupils," Swami Vivekananda said when Nivedita asked him for advice. But a large sign in Bengali, SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, hung on the door of the house; and an exquisite design drawn in rice powder on the threshold, garlands of leaves and streamers of colored paper on the roof offered a bright and hearty welcome on opening day. Guests had been invited and a crowd had gathered in the street.

The guest of honor was Sri Sarada Devi. She arrived toward three in the afternoon, accompanied by several women, and followed by Swami Vivekananda with two other monks. She pronounced a whispered blessing, which was repeated by an elderly lady, and then went into the courtyard over which a roof of branches had been built. There she sat down to welcome the women of the district and their children.

The three little girls who were the school's first pupils had been brought in by Swami Sadananda. They were so shy that when anyone so much as looked at them they hid their faces in their hands; if they were spoken to, tears would fill their eyes and their faces would become sullen. But they did not run

away. Both frightened and curious, they were glad to remain in the "Sister's" house.

This new experiment claimed all Nivedita's attention and vigilance. She had worked out just what could be attempted with her eight hundred rupees (most of it a gift from the Maharajah of Kashmir), and according to her calculations, this sum would keep the school going during the initial period, while she was gaining the Hindus' confidence and working out her educational system. "After that," she said, "if the school proves workable, and attains its aim, I will write a report which will be circulated in both England and India. When it is fully developed, the school can exist only with the support of regular subscriptions from its protectors."

When Swami Vivekananda told Nivedita she must "learn everything from her pupils," he was referring to Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experience when he had taken food with pariahs, Christians, Moslems; when he had dressed like them, and had observed their customs, so that he might know their souls. In the same way, the little girls of Bagh Bazar had become Nivedita's teachers. "Later on," Swami Vivekananda had added, "much later on, after a long period of assimilation, you will build on solid rock: the thousand details of Hindu family life will supply you with the right foundation."

The pupils of the school came when they could, sometimes brought by an old woman, sometimes by a mother carrying her latest-born baby. During the first few days the children stayed in the big hall, eyeing one another, not saying anything, hardly ever trying to play. If nobody was watching, they would become bold enough to show one another their bracelets and their necklaces of glass beads and shells. Their first coquettish gesture was to compare their coiffures. Their tresses were lengthened by threads of silk of many colors. As more pupils came, some of them would have their faces daubed with saffron which gave a golden tone to their bronzed skin, like ripe fruit.

Nivedita watched them living. She tried to find out what they had in common beside a total lack of discipline. She was interested in their moments of silence, their habit of keeping



themselves apart. It was obvious that they were most familiar with acts of worship, for, when they took to playing, these even had a part in their games. Several girls made a rough figure out of clay, to which, several times a day, they brought offerings of flower petals. Yet they played with it as if it were a doll, lulling it to sleep or beating it as they felt inclined; and when the game was at an end they smashed it to pieces, crushing it to the tiniest bits. Then they made other figures which they treated in the same way, and they laughed over them and got a great deal of pleasure out of these creations which they fashioned and destroyed. Subconsciously, these children realized the existence of a whole made up of ephemeral parts. This made their reactions very different from those of little girls in the West, who, at their age, have made many discoveries and possess treasures which they want to keep; and this education seemed to reach them far away, through sacramental activities which they had acquired quite naturally.

The pupils brought to the school all the intimate life of their own homes. Their impromptu games derived from the actions of adults. They strutted around an imaginary well, carrying a jug of water on their heads without spilling a drop. They played the good hostess, bowing to and serving imaginary guests with studied mimicry. The educational games which Nivedita had studied so long, the object of which was to give the child concrete ideas about life, were of no use at all: the Hindu child already had a concrete awareness of life. These little girls knew the chants that accompany the work of the potter, the weaver, the drawer of water. Their mothers had made them learn countless episodes from the sacred epics by heart. They were never tired of drawing on the ground the symbols that represented their whole universe: Surya the sun, Chandra the moon, the print of Krishna's foot, the coiled serpent, or the thousand-petaled lotus surrounded with tiny flowers. They did this with a sense of repetition which recalled the continual recitation of the japa—a short prayer that is repeated indefinitely.

Nivedita's delicate task was to get the most out of this rich

human material and, by teaching the girls all they could absorb, to add color to their grim poverty-stricken lives. She noticed how every little girl, even at the age of ten, was fully conscious of having no other liberty than that of the soul; of being an instrument, which, through marriage, would pass from one family to another, with no ornament save that of complete purity. These children looked at life with no curiosity, each one knowing that for her the inner courtyard of her present home and that of her future dwelling would constitute the secret existence in which her individuality would yield in obedience to her elders. With her veil over her face in the presence of the older women and the men of the family, never speaking to them first, never contradicting them, each learned how to conduct herself with dignity and to know her place in the family hierarchy. But this knowledge, this rigid program, did not rob her games of savor and audacity; and it was precisely that liberty which Nivedita sought to give her at school, and to foster in all her activities.

The children worked in the big room, each one being given a particular task. Reading, writing, and arithmetic became the elements of the Cosmos with which the children played, unconsciously relating them to the notions of time and space. The result was an unbounded enthusiasm, for instead of repeating unintelligible phrases like parrots, the pupils discovered the relation between her thoughts and the words which describe nature, and the value of numbers which advance from unity to the multiple.

The collective lessons were based on games. The arithmetic lesson took place around a basket of tamarind seeds turned out on the ground. The children picked up as many seeds as they could count, multiplied them, bought and sold them, without forgetting a share for the beggar-woman who always came to the door. Then a basin full of clay gave them the joy of molding forms, inventing images, and creating everything from the fishes of the sea to the stars of the heavens.

The children's religious life was that of their family transferred to the school and blended with the progressive elements of

modern education. The vital problem was how to nationalize the modern and modernize the old, so as to make the two one. The slightest mistake might have ruined the whole enterprise. Nivedita took the responsibility of introducing some of her guru's ideas. Talking with her about the practical aspects of her work, he had said to her:

"Out of the old ancestor-puja create hero-worship. Let your girls draw and model and paint their ideal of the gods, as you have images for their worship. Every book is holy, not the *Vedas* alone. . . . The ceremonies employed must be Vedic, with the pitcher full of water on the lowest step of the altar, and lights always burning. Gather all sorts of animals: cows, dogs, cats, birds. Revive old arts, and sewing, embroidery, filigree. The aim of all this has been to express this order: serve humanity; pay homage to beggars and sick babies and poor women every day, as a practical training of heart and head together."

Nivedita's first assistant was Santoshini, a child slightly older than the others—she was twelve—whom Swami Sadananda had singled out at once as being exceptionally gifted. But she was headstrong, unruly, and very difficult to handle. She remained so until she heard that her father, an extremely orthodox man, was trying to find her a husband. The stubborn child then screamed, "Keep me by you, I don't want to be married, kill me instead!" It was then discovered that she had made a secret vow of chastity so as never to leave Nivedita. After Swami Sadananda had watched her carefully to test her real desires, he suggested mildly, "Why shouldn't we take her in as a boarder?" This at any rate would be a solution until the child's father had been approached, but Santoshini rebelled again. "I don't want to live with anyone who's not a brahman!" She protested for several days, but gradually gave in. Without any bidding she found her place in the household and took charge of the smaller children in the morning. "Why haven't you brought your little sister, today?" she would ask. "Were you ill yesterday? If your hands are dirty, the Sister will not be pleased. . . ."

For Sri Sarada Devi, the school was a constant source of interest. She questioned Nivedita about the behavior of the

children, down to the smallest detail. "Endless concessions have to be made," Nivedita admitted in a letter to Mrs. Bull, "and it it were not for Swami Sadananda, who is the greatest strength in this matter, I should lose everything by some sudden fit of inflexibility in the wrong place." Meanwhile, Sri Ma would explain the reactions of the children and their mothers, and would smooth out difficulties in relations between them. She came to the school on every feast day and distributed sweets to the children. Undoubtedly it was the anniversary-day of Sri Ramakrishna that was the best day of all. By the time it was celebrated, in 1899, there were thirty children in the school. After the special puja, seven large closed carriages took Sri Sarada Devi and the women of her household, Nivedita, and all the little pupils to the orchid gardens of a friend of the Ramakrishna Mission. It was a women's outing. "And you must not think that all this meant wild extravagance!" Nivedita wrote to a friend. "Altogether it cost less than twelve rupees apiece. Isn't it wonderful what one can do here?"

The thrifty Nivedita, however, was not free from anxiety. Running the school was expensive. None of the children paid the monthly fee of one rupee that was reckoned in the budget; she even had to give many of them the cotton saris they wore. Several children received medical treatment; among them the little leper girl whom the *ayurvedic* doctor said he could cure. And Swami Sadananda kept on searching out children who were interesting but even poorer. When he saw that Nivedita was worrying about money, he strengthened her with his faith:

"Don't be afraid! Here we don't know what real poverty is. In the old monastery at Baranagore, after Sri Ramakrishna died, Dame Poverty laid her hand much more heavily upon us. We had no clothes to cover our bodies, and we went begging for our bread. In the evening Swamiji would take his cithar and sing, to encourage the younger ones. We pondered on the beauty of his chant, and we forgot our hunger."

There was no doubt that Nivedita was looking to her friends for assistance. Before Miss MacLeod had left Calcutta she had been one of the first visitors to the school, and had played

with the children all one morning. But beneath her gay and carefree outward demeanor she had seen all that was lacking in the household, and she had been appalled by the sight of these sickly girls, and of Nivedita's poverty. Her decision was soon taken: in her own well-to-do existence she was to become the chief help to Nivedita, and to give generously to her in order that she might give to others in return. The very next day she came back, in a carriage heavily laden with provisions for the children: tins of biscuits, grapes, jam, condensed milk, butter, sugar; and with this an assortment of classroom equipment, from slates and exercise books to rolls of cloth to be cut up, along with thimbles and bobbins and scissors. For her friend, personally, she had added a pillow and—supreme luxury—some tea.

Nivedita no longer counted on the help of Henrietta Muller, with whom she had made initial plans for the school. The two had met in January, 1899, to discuss the project, but their aims had been completely divergent, and this was their last talk about the school. Miss Muller had clung to the Christian conception of charity and would have given all her fortune to the work if it had been conducted along those lines; but before the guru's immensity of idea and project she had been, indeed, panic-stricken. According to Swami Vivekananda—and Nivedita—the school belonged to the children, who brought their own family religions to it. To tolerate Christian infiltration would have been to betray the Swami's highest ideal. The interview between the two women was sad; it was the end of their collaboration.

"I can't take anything from you," Nivedita said. "Don't hold it against me! By the grace of the Divine Mother I will work alone."

Amid these difficulties teacher and pupils felt themselves doubly united, doubly attached to one another; they formed one great family under the protection of the Mother whom they invoked every day. When the storytelling hour came near—the liveliest moment of the day—the children would leave their work and cluster around Nivedita. "Tell us about Her," the little girls would beg. "Tell us how She loves us. . . ."

And, for the hundredth time, Nivedita would tell the true story of the love of the Divine Mother for her little ones:

"Baby darling, what is the very first thing you remember? Is it not lying on mother's lap and looking up into her eyes and laughing? Did you ever play hide-and-seek with mother? Mother's eyes shut, and baby was not. She opened them, and there was baby! Then baby's eyes shut, and where was mother? But they opened again and . . . oh!

"When mother's eyes were shut, where was she? There all the time! But you could not see her eyes. Yet she was there . . . And what do we call Mother with her eyes shut? We call her Kali, the Divine Mother.

"Were you ever for a very few minutes unhappy? And did mother or auntie or someone else come and pick you up and love you and kiss you, till you were not unhappy any more? Sometimes God is like that, too.

"We get so frightened because those eyes will not open. We want to stop the game . . . we feel alone, and far away, and lost. . . . Just at that moment when you cried out, the beautiful eyes of the Mother opened and looked at Her child like two deep wells of love. . . . Kali, Kali!

"There is another game of hide-and-seek that the Great Mother plays. . . . She hides sometimes in other people. She hides in anything. Any day you might see Her eyes just looking into mother's, or playing with a kitten, or picking up a bird that had fallen from its nest.

"Stop playing, just for a minute . . . and say, 'Dear Mother Kali, let me see your eyes! . . .'"

The story went on thus for some time, for it was a true story. And the little children opened their eyes wide to see the eyes of Kali. As for Nivedita, she felt the smile of the Divine Mother caressing her tenderly.

## 21. *Brahmo-Samaj Friendships*

ON THEIR return from Northern India in December, 1898, Miss MacLeod and Mrs. Bull had spent a few days in Calcutta with the wife of the American Consul, who had promised to introduce them to Anglo-Indian society.

Their stay had been short but profitable. They had met many of the Indian friends of Swami Vivekananda, among them Girish Ghose, the celebrated author and actor who had been the favorite lay disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Through him they formed a friendship with Rabindranath Tagore, who by that time had left Shilaida (his retreat among the reeds of the Ganges), bringing with him a rich harvest of poems of which Bengal was proud.

Amid all these diversions, however, Miss MacLeod had not lost sight of her ambition to serve Swami Vivekananda's cause. Taking advantage of her family's social connections, she approached the English authorities and obtained privileges which would have been refused if requested by the Belur monks. She even succeeded in getting certain land concessions, so that Vivekananda could undertake the irrigation works and health schemes of which he had dreamed. But although she knew that Nivedita was going through her period of probation, she had never even imagined the austerity of the life her friend was leading.

"What have you done with Nivedita?" she asked Swami Vivekananda reproachfully.

And he answered calmly, "Don't pity her! She is now above

everything dedicated to India. Most of all, do not spoil her! I have devoted more time to her than to anyone else."

In answer to her American friend's eager questioning, Nivedita could now point to a new occupation—or rather, to the return of an old one—which was absorbing all the time not taken up by the school and other immediate duties. The London journalist had rediscovered her former field of activity. When her classes were over, Nivedita sat down to write.

Her articles and reports on the plague epidemic had opened the doors of the principal Indian dailies to her, and she now remained in close contact with them. Several English dailies, also, had accepted articles. Her first success had been a detailed criticism of Max Müller's book on Sri Ramakrishna, which had filled two columns in the *Calcutta Statesman*. The article gave a full history of Vedantic thought in the West, where for the first time Europe had hailed the audacious saint who had declared that all the paths that led to God were equally valid. Then the magazine *Empress* asked her for a series of articles on the "Hindu quarters" of Calcutta; and Nivedita had not suspected that the short, racy pictures which she greatly enjoyed sketching would arouse so much interest. . . .

These articles celebrated the timeless rhythm of India, where all hands work together, where all steps lead toward the same goal, where all intelligences are united in a continuity that mocks death; a country where life was modeled on age-old teachings which revealed the purity of the rituals accompanying the most simple and ordinary activities—eating, bathing, dressing, adorning oneself. Nivedita's stories also took the reader deep into the villages: they described the lives of the water-carrier, the leprous beggar, the peasant working in the rice fields; they depicted the animal-faced gods, the many-armed goddesses, the processions from one temple to another; and then they drew aside the veil behind which the Hindu family conceals its unity.

In their very nature these articles started a current of sympathy flowing toward Nivedita in orthodox Hindu circles. But they also stirred up unexpected opposition. While the English enjoyed her picturesque accounts, which revealed to them an



India of which they were ignorant, the progressive Hindu groups in Bengal, headed by that strong organization of monotheistic religious reform known as the Brahmo-Samaj, openly expressed their dissatisfaction. Nivedita was warned of this by friends, and also by letter from several Hindu women, social workers who belonged to that group. One of the latter wrote:

Your letters are like pages of Browning, full of human sentiments; but the renunciation which you preach has only produced the spinelessness and cowardice from which we suffer. The source of all this is the blindness which lies in the teaching of Ramakrishna. . . .

In the face of such a sharp attack, Nivedita sought to explain her point of view; and through Miss MacLeod she was speedily given an opportunity. The American woman organized for her the first receptions which were to introduce her to intimate Brahmo-Samaj circles. At these she created a sensation. As she passed by she would hear people murmuring, "Very curious, Miss Noble's life! Will she go so far as to wear the yellow robe?" She knew, however, that her educational work, even though scarcely begun, was arousing increasing interest by the audacity of its conception. One of the women of the Tagore family, Sarola Ghosal, had already been several times to Bagh Bazar to see the new school's principles being put into practice. When she went home, she talked so much about Nivedita's work and ideas that the foreign teacher was at once invited to speak about her conceptions of free education, in the schools of the Brahmo-Samaj community. On this ground, agreement was complete; and that assuaged the tension aroused when any religious topic came up for discussion.

Nivedita did not try to avoid argument. Rather, she dwelt upon the preaching of Brahmo-Samaj itself: "God one and alone, without equal." In that, Brahmo-Samaj was a supreme cult of the spirit.

At the same time, she stood close to her guru's side and upheld his argument: "To understand a nation we must do as it does. India is a country of idol-worshipers. You must help it as it is. These images of the gods are more than can be ex-

plained by sober myths and Nature myths. They are visions seen by true bhakti. They are real." For this reason Nivedita applauded every pathetic effort that was made by the people to come nearer to the Divinity, and with them she bowed down before grotesque, bloated, many-colored images. "In my imperfection, O Thou unknowable Brahman, I worship that part of Thee which Thou has let me understand, for it is thus that I can serve Thee."

Like the banyan tree which draws sustenance first from its roots and then from its branches, man first obeys the calls of his earthly being before trying to satisfy his soul. Can an elite promulgate a spiritual code of ethics, pluck the simple man from his faith, and destroy his equilibrium? Every believer in life's effort celebrates his own spiritual ascent. "So far," Nivedita said, "I have not been able to find anything that I could satisfy myself was honest fetish-worship at heart, but my Brahmo-Samaj friends all assure me that India is idolatrous."

Her Protestant upbringing gave her a solid basis for argument in favor of a faith that rejects all outward show, and her eagerness for research and analysis provided her with a ready answer to anyone who might ask how Margaret Noble's rationalism had gradually become the symbolism of Nivedita. The progress from one to the other was merely the substitution of a wider liberty for a narrow truth, in a continual upward ascent. In a highly intellectual society, such arguments as these brought Nivedita popularity. She became a new link between Swami Vivekananda and the Brahmo-Samaj group. And indeed no one had forgotten that in his youth, before becoming a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda had entered his name on the Brahmo-Samaj Great Register, and had thus chosen his path toward the Absolute.

Well before her two American friends left India, Nivedita had become a favored guest in the house of the Tagore family, where a religious discussion was apt to begin as soon as she arrived. Rabindranath Tagore evoked a world of love and beauty in a song whose music was inseparable from the singer himself, and sometimes he would come and read his verses to

her in her house at Bagh Bazar. But although they became real friends, Nivedita remained a complex and contradictory personality to the Hindu poet. Her breadth of vision astonished him, but he was worried by her subjective enthusiasms. One day they just escaped a violent quarrel when Rabindranath asked her to teach his youngest daughter English. She refused point-blank.

"What!" she said. "Do you want me to play the part of transforming a Tagore into a little girl of the West End?" Her eyes were flashing with anger. "Are you, a Tagore, so influenced by Western culture that you want to corrupt your child's soul before it is fully formed?"

What most surprised Rabindranath Tagore was Nivedita's suspension of her free will in her spiritual life, as coupled—and contrasted—with the utmost clarity and precision of judgment in all other matters. One morning while they were discussing a difficult philosophical text in Bengali, a servant from Belur announced that Swami Vivekananda wanted to see her. Nivedita broke off what she was saying. Her expression changed. Her brain ceased to reason. Her face was alight with a joy which she made no attempt to conceal from the strict Brahmo who was also a great poet.

"The blessing of Swamiji is with me," she exclaimed. "I must go at once."

Tagore's brilliant intellectual comrade had suddenly become the humble servant of her guru, and the poet was abashed by that sight.

"There is no doubt," he murmured, "that Nivedita has found the object of her inner devotion!"

Years later, something of Nivedita was to find embodiment in Rabindranath Tagore's novel, *Gora*, whose principal character was modeled upon her, and which contained many incidents from her life. The book was published in 1924, thirteen years after Nivedita's death, but she had known its plot and had discussed it with the author; its protagonist was a man, a strong-willed but humble Hindu—a leader of his group, a champion of liberty, completely orthodox—who finally discovered

that he was the son of an Irish soldier. He was to speak like Nivedita, and to have her flashing eyes and dynamic personality, though at this early date Tagore had not worked out the details of the story beyond the fact of his hero's Irish blood.

Meanwhile, the real broad-mindedness which characterized her work offered her Brahmo-Samaj friends a practical example of her active renunciation, and provided the key to their friendship. They organized further receptions to introduce her to certain progressive Moslem princes, and to the heads of different religious communities. In January she gave a tea in her school-yard for all her Brahmo friends and Swami Vivekananda, and during the first three months of 1899, she delivered a large number of lectures. In various public auditoriums—such as the Star Theatre and the Albert Hall—and in Brahmo-Samaj centers and other meeting places of different groups she spoke on educational and religious subjects, addressing oftenest either the general public or groups of the Young India movement, and always with the warm support of the Brahmo elite.

"Make inroads into the Brahmos!" Swami Vivekananda had said. She was responding to this appeal.

The tie between the Swami and his Western disciple on the one hand and the organization of Hindu monotheistic reform on the other spanned, rather curiously, three generations of the Tagore family. Not only was the famous poet Nivedita's friend; his twenty-six-year-old nephew, Surendranath Tagore, became especially attached to her, brought his influential friends to meet her and see her school, sought to serve her in every possible way, and talked to her for hours of his dreams for India. And the poet's father, Debendranath Tagore, who had been one of the founders of the Brahmo-Samaj movement in the Eighteen Forties and was still in his old age one of its revered personalities, had given his benediction to Swami Vivekananda twenty-five years before.

Surendranath Tagore had the boldness of youth, a passionate love for India, and a firsthand knowledge of the agricultural problems through his own laborers on his family's estates. Through him Nivedita listened to the cry of the peasants in the

Ganges delta as he told her of their seasonal work, with long months of toil on the parched earth under constant dread of drought, and then the feverish unremitting labor of the rainy season with its fear of probable flooding. She asked questions and Surendranath replied. She suggested reforms that might be carried out, listened to his reactions. He said to her, "I know I am too young to serve you, but what can I do for you?" And she answered, "Take care of your peasants. Give them tools and decent housing, reduce their taxes, educate their children, look after their old people. There's a job for a lifetime!"

Although they disagreed in details of Hindu religion—since she continued to follow orthodox belief and he was equally strong in his allegiance to the Brahmo-Samaj movement—they met both in general theory and personal conviction on the ground of social reform and the betterment of individual living. "You see," Surendranath said to the Maharajah of Natore when he was showing him her girls' school, "something great is going to come out of this school; the pupils develop here in joy and peace. Nivedita incarnates the power of tomorrow."

Knowing the great importance which Debendranath Tagore's blessing had had in the life of the young Vivekananda, Nivedita longed to see him. A very old man now, Debendranath had left the family mansion and was living in a tiny room that had been built for him on the terrace of the house in the northern district of Calcutta, where he was born. He lived there alone, in prayer and meditation.

When Nivedita spoke to her friends of her yearning for the privilege of his darshan, they arranged a meeting at once. Accompanied by Surendranath, she went to see him.

At first glimpse of the old man she was captivated by the kindness in his eyes and by his air of serenity. It struck an answering personal chord in her own heart.

"I felt that I was making Swami's *pranams*\* as well as my own; and I told him so, and that Swami had sent me word early that day how particularly pleased he was," she wrote to a friend, "that I came."

\* Solemn greetings in which one prostrates oneself before the person honored.

Debendranath Tagore said to her, "I saw Swami once as a boy, as I was wandering around in a boat, but I would greatly like him to come to see me once more."

That incident had taken place when Debendranath's houseboat was moored in the Ganges, years before, and Vivekananda, a mere youngster then, had wanted to see him, had looked for him in Calcutta, had felt that he was the only man who could calm his anxiety. He had looked at the boat from the banks of the Ganges. The distance from the shore was not great. He plunged into the water. But the river current was strong and he had to struggle against it. When he reached the houseboat he was exhausted and gasping for breath. He clambered on deck, went to the cabin, and opened the door. The old man was meditating on his prayer mat. The sudden noise made him open his eyes.

"Master," the youth had cried out, "have you seen God?" I must, I must see Him!"

The pious elderly man looked at the drawn, anxious face of the student, as if he had added: Were the *Vedas* inspired, were the *Shastras* true, where *was* God? The lad actually demanded, abruptly,

"Can you teach me *Advaita*?"

"The Lord has as yet only shown me Dualism," was the simple reply. And then, seeing the young man's discouragement in the face of such sincerity, the older master had consoled him: "Have confidence, my son: you have the eyes of a yogi; the finger of God is upon you. . . ."

When Nivedita brought back the word, now, that Debendranath Tagore wanted to see him, Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved.

"Did he really say that? Of course I will go," he cried, "and you can come with me. Fix a day as early as you like."

A few days later, Nivedita and her guru were passing through the door of the Tagores' house. She wrote of it later:

We were shown up immediately, one or two of the fam-

*Advaita* is the knowledge of the Divine without form. Dualism is the faith in a personal God, in which there is God and His devotee.

ily accompanying us. Swami went forward and said, "Pranam," and I made it, offering a couple of roses. The saintly old man first gave me his blessing, and then he told Swami to sit down. Then for about ten minutes he recounted, in Bengali, the Swami's various successes with the doctrines he had preached at each point, and said that he had watched and heard it all with intense pride and pleasure. The Tagores were astonished. I ought to have known why Swamiji looked so curiously unresponsive, almost disagreeable. It was shyness! Then the old man paused and waited, and Swami very humbly asked for his blessing. It was given, and, with the same salutations as before, we came downstairs.

It had been Swami Vivekananda's intention to leave at once for Belur, but the Tagores would not let him go. All the male members of the family came gradually crowding about him. He refused tea, but accepted a pipe. After the usual exchange of courtesies, the Swami paid a tribute to Ram Mohun Roy, the founder of the Brahmo-Samaj movement, as "the greatest man modern India has produced." These words, wished for and now pronounced in the presence of the whole Tagore family, were a good foundation on which a new result could be based. Then—of course—conversation turned on symbolism, and the worship of Kali. And here both Nivedita and her faithful friend and ally Surendranath felt themselves on very treacherous ground. Kali was evoked: for some, the goddess of orgies; for others, the Mother of the Universe. Fortunately, Swami Vivekananda's attitude was conciliatory.

"Your position is the true Hindu doctrine," he said, "but you ought to add the other to it, at least as far as to acknowledge the relation of symbolism to it."

Both sides were saved! When the Swami went away, invitations were exchanged with great cordiality.

A little later, Sarola Ghosal and Surendranath Tagore went to Belur as representatives of the entire Tagore family, and Swami Vivekananda showed them around the monastery. He walked with Sarola and Swami Brahmananda, while Surendra-

nath was accompanied by Nivedita and another monk. In the temple of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda prostrated himself piously, while Sarola held aloof. At dusk, Swami Vivekananda invited his guests to take a boat on the Ganges as far as Dakshinesvar, where Sri Ramakrishna had been a priest at the temple of Kali. Women were bathing from the bank, and pilgrims were camping in the shadow of the trees by the water. When Swami Vivekananda appeared a shout arose: "*Jaya, jaya, Guru Maharaj!*" "*Jaya, jaya,*" he replied, "Sri Ramakrishna is with us!"

Nivedita and one of the older monks went on shore with Sarola and Surendranath while Swami Vivekananda rested on the boat. They walked in the garden, sat under the trees, noted the beautiful lines of the moonlight on the steps, and the bright lights on the other side of the river and on the boats. Then they went into the room of Sri Ramakrishna, and the two upper-caste Hindus were taken into the courtyard to see the temple. At that time the temples were not open to the lower castes or to foreigners which means that Nivedita herself never entered the courtyard at Dakshinesvar and never saw the shrine of the Divine Mother. "Kali was shut up," Nivedita wrote in a letter, "but these two hopeful Brahmos returned full of pleasure in the architectural magnificence of the court." She was moved to hope that her two friends might have, as she put it, "drunk at the living fountain of faith," and she was pleased by the evidences of friendship between Sarola Ghosal and the Swami. "It is with Sarola that he talks now when we are all together," she wrote, "and she is beginning to love him as we do. He says she is a jewel of a girl, and will do great things."

Alas for these hopes of unity! A letter arrived two days later from Sarola Ghosal herself, which thanked the Swami for his welcome and urged him to abandon the cult of Sri Ramakrishna, as a condition of the Tagores' co-operation. They would all be prepared, then, to help him in his work and to join forces with him.

Nivedita wept when she read this. She felt herself responsible for all that had happened. Who were they, these Tagores, to



turn this attempt at conciliation into such a ghastly failure? They shared the abstract worship which Swami Vivekananda himself had taught; they liked her house at Bagh Bazar, where there was not a single image; but they refused categorically to offer homage to Sri Ramakrishna.

Her guru consoled her. "If I were convinced that any great good to humanity would be the result, I would sweep away that worship without hesitation, of course," he said. "But let us remember in all humility Sri Ramakrishna's words: 'God is formless and God is with form, too, and He is that which transcends both form and formlessness. He alone can say what else He is.' You see, Margot, when men come into the world with the aim of serving an ideal, they mustn't expect people to be ready to listen to them. But remember also that those who imagine they are completely independent of you are attached to you more servilely than all the others. Those who make a fuss about worship of the Personal—they don't understand themselves, and they hate in others what they know they are struggling against. If only they would understand!"

For Nivedita the lesson was a hard one. She hung her head. Her heart was heavy.

In the Brahmo-Samaj group, Nivedita had met a man who interested her at once: Jagadis Chandra Bose, Professor of Physics at Presidency College. At forty he was already well known, but he seemed to find his fame a burden. His attitude was that of a seeker, of a man struggling in the midst of a hostile society. His timidity was disconcerting but attractive.

The first time they had met, Nivedita had broached the question of the first unity—one of her favorite subjects. The scholar smiled. "You ask science for proof of the unity of *jnana*, of knowledge?"

"Exactly."

"Do you believe that spiritual and scientific experience are one and the same thing?"

"The *Upanishads* seem to assume they are."

From this conversation was born a spontaneous friendship between them, a desire to exchange all their experiences.

Jagadis Bose had a difficult time of it at Presidency College. As he was a Hindu, the Committee had not given him a proper title. This meant a reduction in salary and prevented him from having his own laboratory. Out of loyalty to his Hindu colleagues at the university, Bose had decided to lodge an individual protest and had simply refused to accept his reduced salary. The struggle had gone on for three years. Then, his research on polarization having awakened considerable interest—with the result that the Royal Society in London offered him a scholarship—the government had been forced to give him his title retroactively.

The struggle, however, had been a hard one, and Jagadis Bose was left in a terrible state of discouragement. He felt alone at the university, in his family, in his milieu. Nivedita had sensed this. This "seeker after truth," in whom she recognized herself, lived in a triple prison. She decided to do everything in her power to rescue him from it. The first thing was to give him some friends. She herself had already adopted him. Now her first action was to arouse the interest of Mrs. Bull. She wrote to her:

You know how to inspire a great man to do great work. Think about him. You will achieve a greater kind of greatness, for he is kindness and perfection itself. You must protect him. Become a second mother for him as you are for Swamiji. Bose is sick of life, yet honestly anxious to hold on and on, just to prove to his countrymen that their chances of success in experimental science are as great as those of any European!

At the same time, with supreme discretion, Nivedita encouraged Bose to treat Mrs. Bull as a mother (though the actual difference in their ages was not very great). "Write to her," she advised him. "Tell her about your work; speak to her of your ambitions. Don't keep any secrets from her. Dharamata will always help you. She is waiting for you. She believes in you."

This, to begin with, was just what Bose needed. And when the Indian papers began to speak of his discoveries he felt more cheerful. When letters of congratulation arrived he regained

his confidence. He did not suspect that Nivedita was back of them.

It was to be a lifelong friendship—and what a strange one! Nivedita and Jagadis Bose were bound in perfect honesty by the most contradictory ideals, with no possibility of a compromise. She was only concerned with making his work easier and bringing him recognition. He was often perplexed by this woman who had so few feminine qualities, who was never satisfied by any kind of reasoning (so sure was her sense of the Infinite), and who flung herself headlong into religious experience, following blindly her guru. He had been thrilled by Vivekananda's declaration that his mission was to bring "manliness" to his people, and he had felt the Swami to be a true hero when he tore his great popularity to pieces for the sake of basic truth and of mankind; but his enthusiasm had fallen flat when the hero had become the head of a new order. Nivedita realized that they could not see eye to eye on these questions and so they were left unspoken and unresolved. Their field of agreement was in the physicist's laboratory—a simple room in Bose's house, cluttered with instruments and test-tubes lying on chairs and stools, and with piles of graphs scattered about on the floor. Here human concerns vanished, leaving nothing but pure experience stripped of all spiritual or material significance. Through Jagadis Bose, Nivedita could feel the reality of truth in the mystery of unity, where the infinitely small and the infinitely large combine. She was radiant.

Characteristically, she was indeed all afire with his creative ideas and explorations, passionately eager that they should be made known. Bose said to her:

"Matter is alive. I know it. Don't make any mistake: it is alive. Life is everywhere, even in minerals. I shall capture it. . . . First in the plant and then in the stones. . . . I know it is there."

Nivedita bent over the microscope. The same words kept cropping up: unity, life, atom. All the hypotheses leaped forth. One day she insisted to Bose. "You must write down all that you are telling me. It's important. It's necessary."

He made a gesture of impatience. "How do you expect me to seize on the idea that passes like a flash? It eludes me," he said.

"But I am here," she responded. "My pen is an obedient servant; it will serve you well. It is yours."

She talked at length to Bose, and when she next wrote to Mrs. Bull she ended her letter with words about the scientist and his wife which were, again, part of herself:

It is on your heart, I know, as it is on mine—and you and Yum and I will make these two people feel a warm circle of love and strength about them while there is still time to make the world feel like home. Love for Swamiji does not prevent one's loving others, and loving them does not seem untrue to him.

## 22. *The Worship of Kali*

"If you have to adore an image, why that hideous Kali?" Surendranath Tagore exclaimed to Nivedita one day.

"I adore no image," she replied. "Kali is in me as She is in you. We cannot deny it. Why do you find that revolting?"

It was the first time she had ventured to say openly that the symbol of the Mother of Energy had entered, as a possession, into her own life. Without that question from her Brahmo-Samaj friend she would not have assessed the distance she had come. Swami Vivekananda had never suggested such a self-examination. But she was bound to make a reply to Surendranath's direct inquiry, and in it she revealed her own personal experience, even though the testimony was fragmentary as yet. Her self-analysis showed how she, an austere Protestant Christian, had gone over to a cult of image, and explained why the name of Ma Kali, the great Mother, re-echoed within her with all the intensity of the goddess' power: Kali was the scientific concept of the Supreme Power deified, and stood for all the functions of life.

At the outset, the identification had been difficult and even painful, for Nivedita had relied on her intelligence alone to ascertain what was happening within her, and her intelligence had artfully accepted her defeats without providing any solution to the problem. But at last the barrier that obscured her vision fell away, and Nivedita had understood that, in order to draw near to Ma Kali the Divine Mother, she must trust solely to her intuition and give up all reasoning.

This process had taken a long time. The struggle had actually begun as soon as she left Amarnath, and she had welcomed it. Like a child mastering a new language, she had learned the words and gestures of Kali-worship, and thus drew nearer every day. Then she had realized that, as she wrote in a letter about this time, in India "one does in the name of religion just what one chooses, only all possible desires and deeds are scientifically classified, so that one can find out where one is spiritually by one's own desires." She had made this discovery in the silence of her cell, and had felt suddenly broken. Deeply hurt, she had shut out the grace that was ready to pervade her. Some bonds were still holding—above all, that of obedience to her guru, of submission to him. The fear of losing him intercepted the light; she did not dare plunge into the void.

Where, then, was the secret path toward Ma Kali of which her guru had spoken? His only counsel had been, "Give yourself to Her." He had set her face to face with the vital problem, and at her side he had set Swami Sadananda, the perfect monk, but an individual with whom she had no mental contact at all. Her guru had led her to the fact of Kali without providing her with the means of feeling Her power.

On the day of her dedication, Nivedita had clearly understood that she must find her way by herself. She had entered upon her monastic vows—*Brahmacharya*—through a narrow gate, deeply conscious of all that in her being still eluded her control, but casting it upon the sacrificial fire. The flames consumed the sins of her ego, leaving only the pious love of God. And it was at that moment, in utter destitution, that Nivedita discovered *within herself* the living symbol of the living Ma Kali, Mother of Humanity, with Her right hand blessing and Her left hand destroying: Her day and Her night; that is to say, Her constant double aspect. Nivedita, in her worship, had desired only one thing: to feel Her moving within her. And she had greeted Her devoutly with the words, "*Jaya Ma Kali, Jaya Ma Kali.*"

Swami Vivekananda had followed this progressive development closely. When he felt that Nivedita was strong enough, he put her to the test.

"You must speak, now, about Kali, *your* Kali," he said. "Express Her in your own way."

As a foreigner, and as a Christian, Nivedita met here her first great trial—in the challenge to an explanation of Ma Kali that would satisfy the orthodox people, her progressive guru, and the Brahmo-Samaj reform elite. "What am I going to say?" she wondered. "My only prayer is that I shan't fail completely." The Albert Hall had been booked for her lecture, and its subject, "The Worship of Kali," announced. She had written out what she would say and had discussed it with her guru. In moments of hesitation, as the time came nearer, she repeated the sentence that she was to quote: "My little child, you need not know much in order to please Me. Only love Me dearly."

She knew that her Brahmo friends were lying in wait for her on the concept of "good" and "evil" as mingled in Kali, but she did not wish to bring the Divine Mother before a bar of indictment. As she mounted the platform in the packed hall she was thinking that her speech would be, instead, a thank offering for having caught the cry of Nature in progress toward unity; an account of the upward march of the Hindu who feels one with the elements, who struggles to purify himself, remains no longer himself, begins again, wavers, and comes back again, untiring in his efforts. She spoke slowly, listening to the sound of her own voice. When she finished there was applause from the crowd, and a lengthy discussion followed the lecture. But Nivedita was tired.

"How extraordinary it is," she thought. "All these people have shown their satisfaction in me because I presented to them the symbolic image of the Mother whom they all know well after their own fashion. . . ."

She found her guru at the door, talking with Sarola Ghosal.

"You did splendidly, Margot," he said, reserving all criticism for the carriage journey. She was exhausted and depressed.

"I have only done harm," she said several times. "I shouldn't have spoken. Now I don't remember what I said."

She awaited the Tagores' visit, and their criticisms. These were severe. "Of course," she wrote to a friend, "I am being at-

tacked. What people seem to lose sight of is that no one is making speculation-investments in the worship of Kali now in order to get Sri Ramakrishna's realization later on. We worship Her for what She is. She is God, one of those conceptions which are so powerful as the Names of God. As you respond when your name is uttered, in tones of need or of love, so God to this name of Kali—as much as when we say, "Our Father Who art in Heaven. . . ."

Other Brahmo-Samaj friends said to her: "Your admirable lecture satisfied our intelligence, and even the crowd which only understood what appeals to its instincts. But, in practical life, what does *your* Kali really represent? Can't you tell us?"

What reply could Nivedita make that would convince them? Even those who teach the rites of Kali are silent.

It was a little after this that an unexpected summons came to Nivedita: the high priest of the Kalighat came to Bagh Bazar to invite her to speak, on Sunday, the 28th of May, within the very precincts of the temple of Kali. This would be, for her, tantamount to a public act of faith in Hinduism, a public acknowledgement of the two powers that had sustained her—her guru in his dynamic aspect and Sri Sarada Devi in her static aspect of the same Unity—and it would also be a recognition of the universal character of Kali, at the very foot of Her shrine.

The heat in Calcutta is intense in May. During the two days that preceded her lecture, Nivedita could hardly work at all. On the morning of the 28th, Vivekananda went to see her. "Swamiji came to rescue me," she wrote, "from the depression that overtook me as I felt my way. He did so with great reverence, gradually revealing to me a part of his own life, so as to give me strength. To come face to face with Kali is a formidable undertaking. . . ."

"How I used to hate Kali and all Her ways!" confided the Master. "That was my six years' fight, because I would not accept Kali. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa dedicated me to Her, yet I fought so long. I loved the man, you see, and that helped me. I thought him the purest man I had ever seen, and I knew that he loved me as my own father and mother had not power



to do. . . . But his greatness had not dawned on me then. That was afterward. When I had given in. . . .”

“What broke your opposition down, Swamiji, won’t you tell me?” Nivedita asked.

“That will die with me,” her guru answered. “I had great misfortune at this time and Kali the Mother seized Her opportunity to make a slave of me. They were Her very words: ‘To make a slave of you!’ And Sri Ramakrishna made me over to Her. . . . Curious, he only lived two years after doing that, and most of that time he was suffering. He had only six months of his own health and brightness. Guru Nanak was like that too, you know, looking for the one disciple to give his power to . . . and then he could die. . . .”

The notes in which Nivedita recounts this intimate conversation continue:

The Swami was overwhelmed and went on. “Yes, no doubt that Kali worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her own ends. You see, Margot, I cannot but believe that there is somewhere a great Power that thinks of itself as feminine and is called Kali the Mother . . . and I believe in Brahman too . . . that there is nothing but Brahman, even. . . . It is the multitude of cells in the body that make up the person, the many brain centres that produce the one consciousness. Always unity in complexity! It is Brahman, the One, and yet it is the many gods too. . . . But how She torments me sometimes! And then I go to Her sometimes and say—If you don’t give me so-and-so tomorrow, I’ll throw you over and preach Chaitanya . . . and that thing always comes. . . .”

Then the Swami became very humble and said, “The priests of Kalighat have put me down to preside at your lecture, but I shall not go. . . . I could not restrain my excitement. In my family we have been Kali-worshippers for centuries and every bit of that place is holy to me. Even the very blood in the ground is holy. . . . I have given strict orders about your lecture. There are to be no chairs. Everyone is to sit on the floor, at your feet. And all shoes and hats are to be taken off. You will be on the steps with a few of the guests.”

When he left after this conversation Swami Vivekananda blessed his disciple. As he crossed the threshold he bowed low before her and abased himself abruptly to touch her feet.

"Blessed are you, who will speak of Her," he said. "Be always Her servant."

Nivedita walked barefoot to Kalighat. Swami Sadananda went with her. It was a long journey. Around the temple itself, when they got there, beggars in several rows were tapping on their bowls in which the priests once a day gave them their pittance, and were calling out to touch the hearts of the faithful. In the courtyard, under huge parasols of bamboo leaves, a riot of flowers in all the tones of red and purple—crimson, scarlet, vermilion—shouted their cry of victory to Kali. Around them, worshipers in red and white praying shawls filled the courtyard and sat in the prayer hall. Nivedita spoke from the main staircase:

"The spot where we are met this evening is the most sacred of all the shrines of Kali. For long ages it has been the refuge of pious souls, in need, in sorrow, and in thanksgiving; and their last thought in the hour of death. Let us realize that we are gathered here to worship. . . ."

Stirring and carrying away all the devotees around her, she gave thanks to Kali and evoked the idea of the maternity of God under every sky and according to every rite:

"In Kali is the balm for every wound, as long as we need that. But, when we have grown past this, life will be a song of ecstasy because the last sacrifice has been demanded of us. Religion, it appears, is not something made for the fine words of fine folk: religion is for the heart of the people. To refine it is to emasculate it. Every man must be able to find his bread there. So worship must have its feet on the clay if with its head it is to reach Heaven. . . . At some infinitely distant time, perhaps, when duality is gone, and not even God is any longer God, may that other experience come. It is always on the bosom of dead Divinity that the blissful Mother dances Her dance celestial."\*

\* From "Kali Worship: a lecture at the Kali Temple at Kalighat," published by Haridas Haldar, Calcutta, 1900.

A few days after this, Nivedita wrote to one of her friends:

I have a new feeling about Kali. I look at the intoxicated eyes of Shiva the prostrate God at Her feet, and I see how they indeed meet Hers. She is Shiva's vision of the Mother. Shiva sees the Divine in such a guise. . . . Shiva is Kali, just as Kali is Shiva. Is the truth of it all just a response to the vast working of the human mind? Does man, in a word, create God? I wonder. . . . The secret of the universe has one thin veil of coquetry at least!

In her meditations Nivedita experienced an absorbing fullness. "Kali, my Mother, I am Thy slave," she prayed. "I know little to please Thee. I only love dearly. . . ."

## 23. *Westward*

JUNE BROUGHT its usual stifling heat. It also brought new plans and temporary upheaval.

The difficulties under which Swami Vivekananda labored had increased. He was obsessed by the conviction that he had only a short time to live. And he was harassed by the shortage of money. The last battle against plague had exhausted the monastery's reserve funds, and now its coffers were empty. Several of the monks had gone on begging tours, and two of them had sent in a thousand rupees, but much more than that was needed. The only solution to the problem seemed to be a journey by Vivekananda to the United States, where Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod were urging him to join them.

The situation of the *Math*—the monastery—was indeed gloomy. The older monks were prepared to live in all the austerity of extreme poverty; but what was to become of the novices, whose characters had not yet been forged by the fires of endurance? Swami Vivekananda sent the youngest of them back into the world and kept only those whose vocation had already been put to the test.

In March, he had told Nivedita that she had better leave. "We have no more money and no hope of getting any," he had said to her. "Leave us before the crash comes."

Nivedita had refused to go. Her school was progressing. She herself felt that her wings were beginning to open. Perhaps all this was merely a test that was imposed upon her. . . . Yet she had yielded to the authority of her guru and had ventured upon

only one question: "I shall go if you wish; but, Swamiji, have I failed in any way?"

"No," he replied. "You have done very well. *We* have failed."

Nivedita was revolted by all this pessimism, but she recognized it as one of the consequences of the oppressive climate. "It could have broken my heart, as I know well," she told a friend, "for nothing but the heat and physical depression. And those who are born to it suffer just as much as we do, or perhaps more."

With her own courage as armor, she faced her guru:

"You could fail, Swamiji; but do you feel that Sri Ramakrishna could fail?"

"I never look up to him in that way. My feeling about him is rather peculiar," the Swami explained. "I always think of him as my child. You know, he always depended on me as the strongest of the whole lot. . . ."

They found themselves engaged in a real struggle. She pleaded:

"Swamiji, I have six hundred twenty rupees still untouched. And I think we are strong enough to work, and to fail if need be! We need not think of show. . . . Swamiji, don't even dream of providing for me. Let me go until September on what I have, and work as if there were no chance of losing. . . . I feel sure, somehow, that this is right: to work as if I were building for eternity."

After this conversation, she had at once written, however, to Miss MacLeod:

"I am a burden to Swamiji. I am going to beg for money. One hundred and fifty pounds a year would give life to a school with five children. My aim is clear. Now, for the first time, I have a real chance of succeeding."

Her friend replied: "Come immediately, with Swamiji."

So plans were made for the distant journey. After several changes in the actual date of departure, Nivedita closed her school at the end of May. Swami Sadananda assured the women of the neighborhood that they were not being abandoned, that

the school would be reopened, "with a garden and a home for widows." Jhi, the servant, went back to her village. Santoshini, the twelve-year-old assistant, was in despair at first, but Nivedita scolded her tenderly: "Quiet! You know you belong to me. I have given your father some money for you to be taught English. While I am away, the monks will look after you."

She reckoned that in eight months she would have got together the sum that her school needed. On the basis of six months' solid activity she could form solid plans, which were themselves part of the monastery project.

"Yes, these plans are important," her guru had said to her. "The trip to the West will provide you with the money to carry them out. But it will do still more than that for you, Margot. Don't forget that you are a daughter of Kali! When you are ready, more will be asked of you. Hurry! I see all your past and future, unfolded before me. But, for the moment, continue to be docile and obedient: the child who obeys the Divine Mother."

The monks were not without a feeling of apprehension as they awaited the departure of Swami Vivekananda. They, too, felt that his time was short—a horoscope in which great credence was placed gave him only three more years to live. But they expected that he himself would tell them of his approaching end. There was a story that Sri Ramakrishna on his deathbed had said to this young disciple, "I will come myself to say to you, 'Your task is over, my child. Eat the mango that I have kept for you.'"

And they knew that Swami Vivekananda would say, "I have got my mango," when the time came.

Another monk had been chosen, with Nivedita, to accompany the Swami to the United States; and he had been chosen with deliberate thought. Swami Turiyananda had hitherto held aloof from all practical activity, preferring to devote himself entirely to a life of contemplation. Now Vivekananda had summoned him: "It is for that reason that I have appointed you. The Westerners have enough intellectual knowledge. What they want is the example of a monk who lives his renunciation. . . ."

On the last evening before they started on their journey Swami Vivekananda, with a few of his brother monks, went to spend several hours at Dakshinesvar. Nivedita went with them, and when they entered the temple she sat in the garden under the grove of five trees where Sri Ramakrishna had reached illumination. It was here that, on all her visits, she greeted Kali. On this occasion she sought the Divine Mother's protection on the journey, and prayed to Her for her guru:

"If indeed he be soon to enter into peace, give him, O Mother, a little ease and rest before he goes, and give me the pain you would have given him. . . . While he is alive and here, I will not stir out of reach of him. I could not bear it. I worship, I love him. I dare not risk his wanting me, and not being there. It is terrible to think how my worship must have grown with every minute throughout this year. It is babyish to say, but if God gives Swami awful torture at the last I never want to know Him or love Him any more. Yes, for the personal part of him, as much as any other, I will live and work until I drop. But he won't! He can't! It would be fiendish cruelty."\*

Around her the leaves were quivering in the breeze. It seemed to Nivedita that they were saying a happy japa without interruption—"Ramakrishna, faith-love," which was taken up by the waves of the river. When Swami Vivekananda left the temple he came and sat on the bank beside her.

"I am free now, Margot," he said, "as free as the first day when I came to Sri Ramakrishna: free to walk out of the Math with my staff and begging bowl, and live under a tree."

He had indeed brought to an end all his responsibilities in connection with the monastery. Now he spoke of the importance of the individual being:

"Why, all that can be said in religion can be counted on a few fingers! It's the *man* that results, that grows out of it. Salvation is nothing in itself, it is only a *motive*. Freedom is nothing except a *motive*. It is the man they form that is everything."

He was speaking with deep emotion. "After all, this world This revealing avowal is quoted from a letter dated April 9, 1899.

is a series of pictures, and man is the great interest running through. We are all watching the making of man, and that alone."

He closed his eyes and was silent, sunk in meditation. When he lifted his head again, he chanted:

"*Om tat sat! Hari Om!* [That alone exists]. Now we must go," he added. "The journey before us is long."

Nivedita was present next day when the monks said goodbye to the Swami. She was the last to pay homage to him, holding some flowers in her hand. She looked at him questioningly, but he was inscrutable, impersonal. He let her place the flowers before him, and blessed her as he had blessed each of the monks.

As expected, the sea air brought immediate improvement to Swami Vivekananda's health. At Colombo, in spite of the fact that the plague was raging and severe restrictions made disembarking difficult, Nivedita and the two monks stepped ashore into the midst of a crowd of friends who welcomed them with fife and drums and led them to the houses of several rich devotees. At the meal which had been prepared in their honor Swami Vivekananda ate a piece of fruit and drank a glass of milk, but not until Nivedita and Swami Turiyananda had taken a sip of the latter to show that there was no barrier of caste between the monks and the foreign nun. When he gave the signal for departure, triumphant chants accompanied them to the ship: "Glory to Shiva, Lord of Parvati! Glory to Vireshvara, to Vivekananda!"

The farther west they went, the more storms they encountered. The rains of the monsoon poured down in sheets; waves swept over the decks; the heat was suffocating. But Swami Vivekananda worked on a number of articles he was writing.

Nivedita was working hard, too. She was trying to set down, from the hurried notes she had made en route, a description of her trip to Kashmir, just a year before. Suddenly, as she worked, she would find a new significance in part of her guru's teaching and a new importance in replies he had made to Miss MacLeod



or Mrs. Bull. She relived all that stupendous pilgrimage while she was preparing herself for the new task that awaited her.

To help her in this preparation, Swami Vivekananda reviewed with her all her experiences since her arrival in India. He analyzed them in punctilious detail, leaving nothing obscure. It was a serious examination, which voiced no criticism; but Nivedita had too much intuition not to sense where she had gone wrong. Had not her fine friendship with the Tagores and the Boses been fraught with vanity?

Swami Vivekananda discovered the most subtle attachments, too, which had slipped into her seemingly altruistic actions, until, in insight and confession, she herself exclaimed: "How impulsive my charity still is—only considering its own desire to help others, without measuring the inevitable consequences to which it gives rise! It must become purer and calmer; it must show itself freely to whoever needs it at the most opportune moment. What a subtle lesson!"

When she asked the Swami how to reach this end in practice, he repeated what he had said to her in Kashmir:

"Struggle to realize yourself without a trace of emotion. There is the great secret. And here is another great law: Do not imitate, do not reflect, do not emulate, but remain a being who gives freedom!"

The renunciation that had led Nivedita to depend on others during her time in India now led her to collect money for those who were to depend on her. She was glad to do this. "I shall work like a servant in the cause," she wrote to Miss MacLeod. "I feel an immense power within me."

As the voyage drew near its end the storms subsided. For several days the ship glided on quiet seas, through a pallid fog-laden atmosphere. A morning came at last when Nivedita went on deck early to look at the coastline of Kent, looming low on the horizon. She searched within herself for phrases of tenderness and childish memory, to greet her native land, but a more imperious thought was filling her instead. She wrote it, at once, in a letter:

I feel the great salt tides of conquest rising within me to

meet winds of battle. . . . I know one step more of what I will and will not do. . . . O my Master, how I love and worship you! But this elation must end. I am like a bud which must open and give away what it would like to keep for itself alone. Only today I conquered personal weakness enough to tell you that I must get away from you, for I could do nothing by remaining at your side. They arrived in London on the 31st of July.

## 24. *London Again*

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA and even the unknown monk who accompanied him were included in the joyful welcome that Mary Noble gave her daughter. She would have liked to have her house enlarged and made more comfortable, so as to keep them all with her. But her daughter May met this situation by finding a large room, which she rented for the two monks, in a house nearby. Other pleasant and unexpected neighbors, for the term of the Swami's visit, were two of his American disciples, Mrs. Funke and Christine Greenstidel, who, knowing that he was ill, had come to London to offer him their services and take him to New York, and who now settled themselves in rooms in Wimbledon.

To Vivekananda this stay in London brought, first, a much-needed rest.

"I am tired," he said to Mary Noble, who took delight in spoiling him like a son. "I can scarcely breathe. Your motherly tenderness is the cool oasis I have been seeking."

There were, in fact, not many disciples in London. Most of the faithful had gone away for the summer holidays—including Mr. Sturdy, who had just been married in Wales—and the former group had been split by schism, some of the earlier devotees having formed small separate groups to explain the Vedanta philosophy after their own fashion. Their efforts had remained unchanneled and fruitless, and Swami Vivekananda smiled sadly over their waste of energy.

"It is everywhere the same," he said. "The man of the world, overpreoccupied with earthly thoughts, rushes about constantly trying to do things, instead of merely listening to the songs of the Almighty and His praise!"

To Nivedita there was an inevitable complexity of emotion in this first return to the home where she was Margaret Noble. She gave herself up first of all to the happiness of seeing her family again, of feeling their sympathy and affection, of being closer to them in spirit—to her mother especially—than she had often been in the past. Mary Noble looked at her daughter with eyes whose tenderness spoke of the pain of separation, bravely accepted and never confessed. With May, who was to be married in September, Nivedita discovered a broader intimacy, all in half-tones, full of restrained effusion. The wedding date was set so that she could be sure to be there. But to the family's joyful cry of "Margaret has come back!" she replied, in her own heart, "Let us rejoice, my loved ones; let us love each other. But I must go soon, for I am in a hurry. . . ."

She was so taken up with her family, her friends, her attempts to regroup the Swami's followers, that she never had a moment to herself. Her days were frittered away, she felt, torn to shreds, while actually she was still possessed by the one desire to live solely in the presence of her guru. Sometimes in the afternoon she would escape from her mother and go to join the two Americans, who never left the monk's side. The more timid of the two, Christine, held herself somewhat aloof at first: she had heard the London disciples criticizing Nivedita severely, and she was distrustful of her and a little frightened by her as well. But Nivedita found the words to disarm her:

"I love you in the love for the guru. There are no barriers between you and me. Don't you feel that we are made to be friends and servants in his cause?"

In the evening the travelers and the family friends would gather together under the arbor in the Nobles' garden, and Nivedita would talk, very gladly, of India and her life there. She spoke in a clear, childlike voice which helped to create the atmosphere of the living myth. Did she not herself sometimes

slip "out of truth, out of time," into the golden legend of the gods? So now she went, and took her hearers with her, along the roads of India, flanked with gnarled and swollen-trunked banyan trees that belong to the fantastic world of the gods, with their twisted roots trailing over the ground like sleeping serpents. In the deep grass and the jungle bushes the wild beasts hunt. A peasant goes by bent under the bundle of firewood which he carries on his head. He stops exhausted at the lofty wayside shelter which at crossroads serves the same purpose as stone seats at home. All is calm. He hears the monotonous chant of the water-drawers linked to the wheel of the well which marks the rhythm of their efforts. Far off the ceaseless beat of drums from a temple calls the faithful to worship. Women go by, their jars filled with water resting on their hips. A flute is playing. Is it Krishna's? "*Hari!*" calls the faithful one. "Where are you? My Krishna is playing in the shadows. Let me see Your face. You who are the refuge of my soul, the blood of my heart!" The halo of the god is one with that of the moon, eyes choked in dust can hardly see. The bewitching chant is an intoxication. Fatigue disappears, feet go flying on. Krishna himself carries the burden that is too heavy. . . .

Nivedita lived to the full among all the symbols, and she explained by examples from her own life how coherent Indian life is, even in its smallest details. Every gesture, she explained, is the result of a natural movement, of an ideal sprung from the earth as Sita was born from a furrow ploughed by her father; as the fires lighted in the fields all through the countryside are a homage to Agni in the ashes that give back the burned farms to the earth. Every movement sustains the cosmic stability, whose spell is never broken. . . .

Mary Noble, listening, was deeply moved. Yes, that was it . . . her Margaret lived in a dream which for her had become reality. The mere presence of the Swami confirmed this evocation, even before he plunged into it in his turn, with parables that resembled those of Jesus. . . .

It was late, on this night, when the party reluctantly broke up. The two sisters went on talking. May was overwhelmed

by the images that had been conjured up before her. Clasped in her sister's arms, she sought protection.

"Defend me, you who are strong," she cried. "I feel that if I give way to Swamiji's power, then I shall never marry. I mustn't listen to him, for I have already given my word."

Richmond Noble, also, felt the power that radiated from Swami Vivekananda's spirit and personality. This evening he had waited impatiently for the moment when he could see the Swami out, and, as they left the house together, he walked at a snail's pace so as to prolong to the last moment his tête-à-tête with the monk, listening to his words about God—who was after all the kind indulgent Father whom Vivekananda described, rather than the inexorable Lord feared by Richmond's family. Captivated, imbued through and through with confidence, the young man opened his heart to his sister's guru. "To have known the Swami," he wrote later, "was to have known something of what Christ was."

Swami Vivekananda had also taken to Richmond. He laughed wholeheartedly one day when the youth complained jokingly that the entire household had been deprived of roast beef in order to comply with Indian regulations. No, no! he cried: had Nivedita been laying down the law to her family? And, that very day, he took Richmond to a little restaurant and, to his young guest's great astonishment, ordered a well-done steak.

"Eat, my boy," he said. "It's for you. I am giving you back what Nivedita has taken from you!"

The monks' stay in London was short. With the two American women, they left on the 17th of August. Nivedita was to set sail for the United States immediately after May's marriage.

The day of the wedding came at last—an occasion as lovely as all weddings should be. Relatives—among them cousins who were quite unknown—came from Ireland. The house was filled with flowers. An uncle gave the bride away, and rose and lily petals were showered on the bridal pair as they went out together. Nivedita was bridesmaid—dressed in white alpaca, her eyes sparkling beneath a hood covered with tulle and flowers.

Standing beside her mother after the ceremony, shaking hands with everyone, she played her part lovingly.

But as soon as the couple had left, under the traditional hail of rice, she slipped off her dress, folded it, and put it back in its box. It was a present from Miss MacLeod, and on the box Nivedita's fellow disciple had written: *Make yourself pretty. Charm and elegance in your appearance will make people want to know you and hear you talk about Swamiji.*

Nivedita had smiled as she obeyed. But now her life of service had to go on.

That same night she caught the train for Scotland, where she was to embark for New York. Turning a deaf ear to her mother's grief, hard to herself also, she kept saying, inwardly, "I am no longer responsible for anything. The work of the Divine Mother is all I have to think of."

To her guru she sent a brief message: *I am thirsting for the combat.*

## 25. *Sannyasa*

IN NEW YORK friends were waiting at the dock to escort her to Ridgely Manor, the Hudson River home of Miss MacLeod's older sister, Mrs. Leggett, where Swami Vivekananda and Mrs. Bull were already guests. The house was large and comfortable, there were spacious grounds where it was always possible to find individual privacy. Mrs. Bull and her daughter Olea were installed in a small lodge at some distance from the main house. Mrs. Leggett, whom her friends called "Lady Betty," made a practice of entertaining artists, writers and other creative personalities in house parties to which she and her three daughters knew how to impart an atmosphere of hospitality at once stimulating and restful. This autumn she was happy to have Swami Vivekananda, Mrs. Bull, and Vivedita all under her roof together, as well as Christine Greenstidel and a few personal friends of her own.

During his first days there, the Swami had rested. He was suffering from chronic diabetes, the symptoms of which had already appeared when he was a student. Insulin had not yet been discovered. Throughout his stay at Ridgely Manor he was able only intermittently to join the coterie which grouped itself around him, but during his good moments he gave of himself unstintingly, explaining the divine life and expressing ideas that sprang from the depths of his heart. At these times his hostess allowed nothing to disturb the atmosphere of calm which she created around him. Plans would be canceled, even the



hours of meals would be changed. Every minute was precious, for sometimes the Swami would be seized with a fit of coughing and would be obliged to leave abruptly. Sometimes, too, his eyes would be fixed in a stare, and his words would be spoken with difficulty. Then, transported by his inner vision, he would pass the rest of the day in silence, indifferent to everything that went on about him.

But he was watching Nivedita closely.

For her, this was the pause before the battle: a time given to her, she knew, for the unloosing of what was still bound in her, for whatever orderly adjustment she might need before she went forth alone to deliver her guru's message. And the days were flying. A vast correspondence had sprung up between Ridgley Manor and the intellectual circles in Boston and Chicago which had received Swami Vivekananda favorably. There was evident curiosity in regard to herself, a wish to hear the experience of a Western woman living an orthodox Hindu life in India.

For the Swami, the stage she was going through was important in his work.

"Do you think, Margot, that you can collect the money you want, in the West?" he had asked her on the ship.

"I don't think, Swami: I know," she had answered.

"I hope so. There were two things I wanted to see before my death. One is done, and this is the rest."

He gave her no help, now, in any of her preparations. He was biding his time. But he wept when Nivedita came to him and said calmly, "O Lord, I want to drink at the fountain of peace. What I shall find there I don't know, but I am confident. The time has come!"

"Peace be with you," he said to her, simply. "My peace is in you. Bring it to fruition."

That same evening—September 21st, 1899—as Nivedita was returning from a drive with Miss MacLeod, he handed her a paper, on which was written: *Such is this peace which I give you, and in which I have lived this happy day. Receive my blessing!*

Behold, it comes in might,  
The power that is not power,  
The light that is in darkness,  
The shade in dazzling light.

It is joy that never spoke  
And grief unfelt profound,  
Immortal life un-lived  
Eternal death un-mourned.

It is not joy nor sorrow  
But that which is between;  
It is not night nor morrow,  
But that which joins them in.

It is sweet rest in music  
And pause in sacred art,  
The silence between speaking  
Between the fits of passion:  
It is the calm of the heart.

It is beauty never loved,  
And love that stands alone;  
It is song that lives unsung  
And knowledge never known.

It is death between two lives,  
And lull between two streams:  
The void whence rose creation  
And that where it returns.

To it the tear-drop goes  
To spread the smiling form;  
It is the goal of life,  
And peace, its only home.

Throughout the month that followed, the Swami's teaching was entirely directed toward Nivedita, who had become the

pivot of his thought. Even during the evening, when all the guests at Ridgely Manor assembled around the hearth in the drawing room, her friends gave way to her; and although the Swami—sitting Indian fashion on a cushion in the light of the fire—replied willingly to all questions, he always touched upon the basis of what was in Nivedita's mind. One evening he said:

"You see, there is one thing called love, and there is another thing called union. And union is greater than love. So no man *loves* that thing in which his life has been spent, in which he has really accomplished something. I do not *love* religion. I have become identified with it; it is my life. That which we love is not yet ourself. . . . This is the difference between chakti [the way of devotion] and jnana [the way of discrimination], and this is why jnana is greater than chakti."

As she listened to her guru Nivedita said to herself, "I am free power, without will or desire." But she was seized at the same time by a tremor of fear. "Shall I have the strength to go forward alone?" her heart added.

Swami Vivekananda was now communicating this strength to her, as she made clear—detailing every incident—in the letters she wrote to Miss MacLeod, who had been summoned to the deathbed of her brother in California.

This morning when I came downstairs he paced up and down for an hour-and-a-half, like a caged lion, warning me against politeness, against this "lovely" and "beautiful," against the continual feeling of the external. "Realize yourself *without feeling*," he says, "and, when you have known that, you can fall upon the world like a bolt from the blue. I have no faith in those who ask, 'Will any listen to my preaching?' Never yet has the world been able to refuse to hear the preaching of him who had anything to say. Stand up in your own might. Can you do that? Can you? If not, then come away to the Himalayas, and learn." Then he broke into Shankarachary's sixteen verses on Renunciation, ending always with a humming refrain: "Therefore, you fool, go and worship the Lord!" And sometimes he would make it, "Therefore, Margot, you fool, go and worship the Lord!"

Her letters, in this autumn of 1899, continued:

To get rid of all those petty relations of society and home, to hold the soul firm against the perpetual appeals of sense, to realize that the rapture of autumn trees is as truly sense-enjoyment as a comfortable bed or a table-dainty, to hate the silly praise and blame of people—these things were the ideals to hold up.

As he warned her against subtle weakenings of the spirit, both from outside and within—against even the luxury of meditation—Nivedita watched Swami Vivekananda going through both physical and spiritual suffering. The news of poverty-stricken Belur and of the quarrels of the London disciples had both taken their toll.

"Imagine God, even, against him, and conceive the joy of standing by him then," she wrote in a letter. And she was even more explicit about her own feeling in another letter written at about the same time:

I came to India with little or no dependence on the personal side of Swami. In that awful time at Almora, when I thought he had put me out of his life contemptuously, it still made no difference to the essentials. Now he is the whole living, for good or for evil; instead of growing less, I have grown infinitely more personal in my love. I am not sure but his least whim is worth the whole, and now when one turns to him in thought the heart grows free. Blessed be God for making it possible to love like this!

A little later, however—in mid-October—Nivedita wrote from the cottage in the garden where she had taken up her quarters:

After this letter, it will be a long time before you will get more Swami from me. You see, I have to finish *Kali the Mother*,\* and there are other things I have to do—and I have always longed to try a retreat anyway, and my great obstacle was the Master. So I manoeuvred between him and Dharamata that it should be announced in public that I was to go into retreat for fifteen days."

\* A small book of 114 pages, published in London in 1900.

Swami Vivekananda had approved of this decision on Nivedita's part and had encouraged her action. On the last evening before her "retreat" the guests had a reading from Schopenhauer—on Women—and then walked under the stars to the lodge. Nivedita and the Swami walked together.

I whispered to him that I couldn't bear even the sound of our feet in the dead hours at night. It was wonderful moonlight, and we walked up the avenue in silence [she wrote]. A sound would have been desecration. Then he said, "When a tiger in India is on the trail of prey at night, if its paw or tail makes the least sound in passing, it bites it till the blood comes. It always goes wind with the wind."

As they came to a crossing of paths from which a wide view opened out, the Swami stopped and smiled tenderly upon his disciple.

"It is here that your retreat must begin," he said. "Go in peace." And he quoted the *Katha Upanishad*: "*When desire is all gone, and all chords of the heart are broken, then man attains immortality.*"

Nivedita found these days of silence an extremely hard test. She tried to lose herself in her work—several short essays illustrating the aspect from which she worshiped her Divine Mother and called Her to her—but when she put this in writing, the words were heavy, they rang false, their real sense was masked. Why did her Divine Mother leave her in this distress? she cried. Ideas rose and fell within her like notes of an elusive melody, and when she tried to seize them they faded into nothingness. "Why is my peace dead?" she cried again. Then in reply to her demand she discovered the words of comfort which she set down in *Kali the Mother*: "Think it was for My pleasure thou camest forth into the world, and for that again, when night falls and My desire is accomplished, I shall withdraw thee to My rest. . . . Remember that I who cry have shown also the way to answer."

She wrote to a friend: "I am simply stranded over my essay on the Saints. Tonight I have written to the end of Ramprasad, and I want to finish that and get into Sri Ramakrishna, and I cannot. I wrote some pages of rubbish and tore it up, and then

took in despair to copying out of the second chapter of the *Gita*: 'Who abandons all desires, and lives and acts free from longing, who has no "I" or "mine," who has extinguished his individual ego in the One and lives in that Unity—he attains to the great peace.'

These words, which she knew by heart, blazed in the middle of a page. As she wrote them, she realized her mistake: she was still praying in her heart instead of finding the strength to bring that heart as an offering to Her who knows all things. Two days passed; and then, overcome with mental exhaustion, she wrote down her dialogue with her Divine Mother:

"Mother! Far away, one whom I love is very sad today. His heart calls to mine for help, but though I tell him how I love him I leave him still uncheered. How is it?"

"Cease, my child, from inordinate affection. Give Me your heart, and let Me govern it alone. Be the witness of earth's joys and sorrows, sharing them not. Thus only can you keep yourself from entanglement, and attain peace."

"But peace for myself, dear Mother, why should I seek? Give him that inner peace. Let me win it for him, if Thou wilt be kind! But I cannot will to fail him in his need and loneliness, even to gain Thy blessing!"

"Ah! Foolish one! Every thought of love that you send out to answer his becomes a fetter of iron to hold him in life's anguish. Hide yourself in My heart, my child. . . . Only thus can you satisfy him. Only by withdrawing yourself can you bring him peace."

"Mother, I yield! Take me, I pray thee, into thine own heart. Let me look not back. If Thou wilt call me I shall find my way there, surely, though my eyes now are blind with tears. . . ."

"Silly, silly child! Like a helpless bird, you beat your wings of littleness against My grace! For already the cloud that seemed so black is passing. The hearts of two beat high, for the conquest born of renunciation."\*

Very late on the evening of the fifth day of her retreat,

\* From *Kali the Mother*; "Intercession."

Swami Vivekananda knocked at Nivedita's door. Guessing what she had been going through, he came in and talked to her of the worship of Kali and of Sri Ramakrishna's sense of the goddess's presence and power. He blessed her, and, on leaving, gave her a solemn warning:

"The Guru of gurus is Shiva; now you know. Beneath the tree of Wisdom, He teaches, destroying ignorance. One must offer to Him all one's actions, else even merit would become a bondage and create karma. . . . How much greater to give one's youth! Those who come to it old attain their own salvation, but they cannot be gurus for others. Happy is he who gives his life in the flower of his youth; he is a true guru."

Two days later the Swami put an end to Nivedita's retreat.

"May the peace which has come upon you be your glory," he said to her. "The moment for action now lies before you. The Mother in Her manifestation of Energy will always sustain you. Evoke Her, summon Her. Durga, Durga!\* She will fight for you with unconquerable weapons, and will vanquish the demons. She will give you the necessary energy."

One by one the guests were leaving Ridgely Manor in these autumn days. And this was as well, because the Swami was being lashed by a wave of intense mysticism like a cliff in a raging sea. Sometimes he gave way to the most violent despair at the thought that all his personal efforts had been reduced to ashes. He was obsessed by a single idea—to give all he still possessed while there was time. India was calling. How could he resist her voice? "Where am I now?" he kept repeating. "Why am I still here? And so to Thee, Ramakrishna, I betake myself. For at Thy feet alone is the refuge of man. . . . This body is going away, it shall go with hard austerities. I will say ten thousand *Om* a day and will fast alone by the Ganges in the Himalayas, saying, '*Hara, Hara, the Freed One*' I will change my name, and this time none shall know. I will take the initiation of sannyasa over again, and I will never come back to anyone again. . . . How I curse the day that brought me celebrity!"

\* "Durga" is one of the names of the Hindu Divine Mother.

His face, haggard with illness, betrayed the awful thought that he had lost his power of meditation. "I have given everything to you all, mlecchas," he said one day. "Now I am nothing myself." He became more and more impatient. One morning after breakfast he said to Nivedita, before everybody:

"How much longer are you going to hang on here? When are you going to decide to leave and begin your work?"

Taken aback as she was by this unexpected attack, she replied calmly: "I am here under your express instructions. I am quite ready to leave."

Olea Bull, who was just going out of the room, turned around suddenly.

"I'm leaving Ridgely Manor the day after tomorrow, for Chicago," she said to Nivedita. "Will you come with me?"

Nivedita accepted this invitation at once, and the Swami was delighted.

"Ah, if I had your health and strength I would conquer the world!" he cried. "Austerities are not for you. Work, fight, always and in every circumstance feel yourself free. I give you every liberty. You are to search deep into your inspiration and then trust nothing else. Remember you are only the servant of the Divine Mother. And if She sends you nothing, be thankful that She leaves you so free. I wish She would leave me so!"

It was then decided that Swami Vivekananda should leave for New York on the same day, with Mrs. Bull. The only thing still to do was pack.

"Nivedita, will you do it for me?" he asked, timidly. "I've really no idea how to go about it." She agreed, and while she was busy sorting out papers and books he set aside several of the silk scarves with which he draped his turbans, to give to his hostess's daughters. Then he got out two huge pieces of cotton material, the color of the other yellow robes, of the sort he wore in India.

He motioned to Nivedita to stop her work, and asked where Mrs. Bull was.

"In my room, probably, writing letters," she answered.

"Come, then," he said.



He hurried into the room ahead of Nivedita and, when she had entered, closed the door behind her. The two women looked at each other in amazement. Serenely radiant, the Swami stretched out his arms.

"My children, I have come, I have come," he said.

Nivedita, who had no suspicion of what was going to happen, described the scene later in a letter to Miss MacLeod:

First he shut the door, then he arranged the cloth as a skirt and *chuddar* [a shawl] round Dhiramata's waist, then he called her a sannyasini. Then, putting one hand on her head, and on mine, he said, "I give you all that Ramakrishna Paramahansa gave to me. What came to us from a woman I give to you two women. Do what you can with it. I cannot trust myself. I do not know what I might do tomorrow, and ruin the work. Women's hands will be the best anyway to hold what came from a woman, from Mother. Who and what She is, I do not know. I have never seen Her, but Ramakrishna Paramahansa saw Her and touched Her like this." And Swami touched my sleeve. "She may be a great disembodied spirit for all I know. Anyway, I cast the load on you. I am going away to be at peace. I felt nearly mad this morning, and I was thinking and thinking what I could do when I went to my room to sleep before lunch. And then I thought of this and was so glad. It is like a release. I have borne it all this time and now I have given it up. . . ."

Were these exactly the words he used? I think they were. It seems to me that it must have been about 3 o'clock or shortly after, for I think it was daylight still. . . . We both thought of you at that moment, darling. And so, Yum, happened "the event of my life," the great turning-point, and the dear Saint Sarah's.

According to the rules now in force at the monastery of Belur, this does not constitute formal ordination. But Swami Vivekananda had already given similar initiation in the United States to another woman, the Swami Abhayanda, and to two men, the Swami Kripananda and Yogananda, and there are other

instances of nonformal initiation among the early monks of Belur Math. When Nivedita returned to India two years later, in November, 1901, she discovered that her initiation to sannyasa was being discussed, and she decided to keep to her title of Brahmacharini. Several times, however, she spoke in public in the ochre-yellow robe of the monks, and she wore it in her own house during the latter part of her life.

At the present moment, however, all such questions of "formal" and "nonformal" were far away. Prostrate before her guru, Nivedita felt, during this ordination, an all-pervading, all-absorbing power and strength. She no longer possessed body, heart, reason, intelligence. The monk's hand on her head was warm, heavy, and powerful. She was receiving the supreme gift in full knowledge of its significance. And a vision passed before her eyes, of the souls free and the souls bound, the boats moored to the shore and the boats speeding off in the sunshine, the life tied to interest and circumstance and the life at liberty to be offered to the greatest. . . . It seemed so true, so deeply inborn. She almost asked, "Can it be that I am free, that I have been free all along, only I didn't know it, that I realize the joy of it like this?"

Taking leave of his two favored disciples before they all left Ridgely Manor, Swami Vivekananda walked beside them in the park, as happy and carefree as a child. "I have become Shuka again!" he said. "That is the name Sri Ramakrishna gave me in the good old times, before dedicating me to Kali. Shuka was an *enfant terrible* who laughed at the world. He adored his Divine Mother. Now, like him, I am playing in the Mother's garden. . . ."

Nivedita watched him with a tenderness shot through with grief.

I cannot conceal the thought from myself [she wrote to Miss MacLeod] that as his Master lived one year and a half after giving his Power to him, so he has but a short time to live. Life has been torture to him, and I would not ask him to endure it longer, merely for our pleasure. But, oh, Yum, Yum, if your prayers have any weight with the Eternal, see

to it that his time becomes one of relaxation and triumph. If I should die a thousand deaths hereafter, in a thousand flaming hells, I implore, *no*, I demand, of the Supreme that I be allowed to win and lay some laurels at his feet while he is yet with us. If God have indeed a Mother's heart, surely we cannot be refused this boon! For you will pray for it too, won't you? As Saint Sarah does, I know. It is a great thing to be the one privileged to endure the brunt of the battle, but it is all of us together, really, who are doing it; it is no one person. Each of us in each place, for all the others, is serving him.

A friend of Mrs. Leggett's tried to persuade the Swami to give her one more interview on the morning of his departure, but he shrugged his shoulders and snatched himself away. "I have no message," he said. "I used to think I had, but now I know I have nothing for the world. Only for myself. I must break this dream."

The two groups of travelers separated at the railroad station. Up to the last minute Swamiji kept showing concern for the details of Nivedita's journey. "Have you forgotten anything? Something to read, a blanket, a hot drink? What else can I do for you?" he asked. When the final goodbyes were being spoken he clasped his hands together. "Always when you are beginning anything or going anywhere, say *Durga, Durga, Margot*. That protects from all dangers," he said.

There was something deeply personal, immeasurably moving, in this last bit of advice. It seemed to hold all the love of a father for his daughter. The guru, the stern teacher, had completely disappeared.

## 26. *Work in the United States*

"REMEMBER YOU are only the servant of the Mother. Demand help, don't buy it." Nivedita repeated this order from her guru over to herself. She did not realize, then, how difficult it would be to beg for money in the United States.

Olea Bull remained in Chicago for a few days, and Nivedita stayed with her in her hotel and became genuinely attached to her. She was a "temperamental" and generally undisciplined sort of girl, who, at twenty, was apt to give way to unpredictable moods and impulses when her mother's gentle influence was absent; but she found an outlet for her energy in piloting Nivedita about Chicago and introducing her to her mother's friends. It was thus that Nivedita visited Hull House, met Jane Addams, and was invited to deliver a series of talks at the Settlement.

It was a moving debut. To an audience made up of immigrants of different races and religions, many of whom had suffered persecution and misery, and many of whom were Irish who cheered her up, Nivedita spoke of the peace which the pilgrim of life finds when he moves forward toward his own liberation, with the mysterious assurance that everything is in himself: the effort, the mastery, the joy over the gift of oneself, and the great final light. In response to a bombardment of questions, she translated the mystical experience of the Hindus into a language her hearers could understand. On the last evening, some men brought her a box containing \$15.00 col-

lected among them dime by dime as their offering to their brothers in India.

But Chicago's wealthier society gave Nivedita a colder welcome. Her firm refusal to accept a fee for her lectures, and her identification with Swami Vivekananda—who had both his followers and his opponents—alienated a large section of the public in the first place. Then, too, she spoke of a philosophical and mystical India, instead of playing the role of an English journalist, as she had been expected to do, and revealing the secrets of her sensational initiation into Hinduism. Her oversimple appearance in her nun's robe seemed out of place. All told, the tide seemed set against her. But she refused to give way, and counted rebuffs merely as part of the game she meant to win.

Gradually a few private houses and missionary organizations opened their doors, and she gave talks on the women of India, and on the arts and crafts of the different provinces. She told stories to schoolchildren, too, about the gods and heroes of India, and then she would suggest the organization of a mutual-assistance guild. When Olea left Chicago she moved into a furnished room, and there several friends of Swami Vivekananda, under the leadership of one of his disciples, Mary Hall, came to delve with her into the depths of Indian thought. Yet all this amounted to very little. Opportunities of speaking in public were few, and became fewer. Nivedita's name aroused no curiosity. The newspapers had no space for her—and very little for any news from India. So far as Chicago in general was concerned, she seemed to be up against a blank wall.

Yet when Swami Vivekananda stopped off for a day, en route to California, she did not speak to him of her difficulties. He was confident, given over to the will of the Divine Mother, a song of inner triumph on his lips. And Nivedita, in regard to herself, remembered a warning he had once given her: "When people come into the world to serve an idea, Margot, they have to make their own material, too. They must not expect to find people ready to listen."

That was what she wanted to experience, fully and alone.

Then suddenly, one evening, everything changed. She had

gone with Mary Hall to hear a debate in a women's club, on "The Responsibility of America in Spreading Anglo-Saxon Culture throughout the World." The speeches dragged on and on. When the meeting was thrown open Nivedita rose and went to the platform. It was the vivid Irish personality, the alert and practiced public speaker, who was addressing the audience, and she held them with every word. Reporters came demanding interviews. Her name was in the papers. It seemed that everybody was now curious about her. She was constantly in demand as a lecturer, constantly on the move, for the next seven months.

Wherever she went she created her own atmosphere, whether she was in a church, in a private house, or in a public auditorium. And people crowded around her less to ask questions about India than to receive something of the force of her serenity. Disciples of Swami Vivekananda asked her to speak about her guru, and she did so simply and lovingly.

"I have no personal message or mission," she said of herself "but only the past experience of suffering in order to shake off egoism. . . . It is a great lesson."

Orientalists, who had come to the United States years before, would pass on the news of her arrival in their cities and come to offer her their services. Most of them were very poor, but they piously gave their *obole* for India. One day a Buddhist laid a tiny packet of tea before her, and joining his hands in greeting, withdrew without a word.

When she was surrounded and congratulated after a lecture, she would call out in her clear voice, "And now what are you going to do for me?"

And she would beg humbly of her surprised listeners, "Give me a dollar a year for ten years!"

"What can one do with so little money?" people asked, laughing.

"Build for the future," Nivedita answered. "I want your co-operation, the co-operation of all of you, to establish a permanent fund for the women and children of India. That is what counts, and that will be your achievement."

In this way she received the subscriptions of large numbers of people for the "Nivedita Mutual Assistance Guild," newly founded and of which the Leggetts were the patrons.

In a pamphlet, which was widely circulated, Nivedita defined the aim of her future school: not to be a missionary activity, but a Hindu institution for Hindu women. Traveling about in the Middle West, she not only collected money but received offers of service from many women, some of whom even spoke of going with her to India. Yet when she returned to Chicago she found that the interest she had aroused there had already died down. If she decided to stay, she would have to begin all over.

"Everything depends on organization and method," she said later. "I can take my responsibilities on my own shoulders, now, as much as Swamiji does his. I have got my diploma in public acclaim and indifference. I grow more and more convinced that no one is wholly responsible for his own success or failure. So much depends on the ability of others to co-operate."

This experience gave her an opportunity for taking stock: "How far has the desire to succeed entered into my work? Has my appeal for the women of India remained entirely disinterested? Let me, O my Divine Mother, serve for love of serving, and for centuries and centuries"

The obstacles which Nivedita could not wholly surmount were the nervous exhaustion and overwhelming physical fatigue that followed her months on the road. She did not complain, but the effort had been too long. Swami Vivekananda felt this, and wrote to her:

All blessings on you, my dear Nivedita! Don't despair in the least. *Sri Wah Guru! Sri Wah Guru!* You come of the blood of a kshatriya. Our yellow garb is the robe of death on the field of battle. Death for the cause is our goal, not success. *Sri Wah Guru!* Shiva says: "But I am the Master. I raise my hand, and lo, all vanish. I am the Fear of fear, the Terror of terror." Steady, child, don't be bought by gold or anything else.

It was not until June that Nivedita went back to New York,

where it had been arranged that she was to meet Miss MacLeod and Mrs. Bull again at the Leggetts'. She had expected to return at once to India, but her friends, in agreement with Swami Vivekananda, had decided otherwise. The entire little group was going to Paris, and the suggestion was that she should accompany them and join forces in Paris with Patrick Geddes, whom she had met with his wife at Ridgely Manor and who had expressed the desire for sociological work with her. Nivedita had become greatly interested in the activities and theses of the famous biologist and social scientist, and while discussing his work with him she, in turn, had talked to him at length of her Indian experiences.\* Now the prospect of some professional association with him opened up limitless possibilities for her, and she was overjoyed. Working with him would give her the chance to acquire his method of investigation and his means of transmitting knowledge, and she could delve into European history under his guidance.

The stay in Paris would also, to her great delight, offer her the opportunity of meeting Jagadis Bose again. Thanks to the enterprise of Mrs. Bull, both in England and America, Bose had been granted a scholarship which would maintain him through several years of study, and he was now on his way to the West.

She was to sail almost at once—immediately after the lecture she was scheduled to give at Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, on "The Ideal of the Hindu Woman." Swami Vivekananda arrived in New York on the day of the lecture, and for the first and only time heard her address a Western audience on the subject of India. He found her moving, simple, and fervent, more Hindu than a Hindu, speaking of the land of her soul, as luminous as light itself. And he wept with gratitude.

\*It was nineteen years later that Patrick Geddes became professor of sociology and civics at Bombay University, and began his surveys in Indian cities.



## 27. In France: Decision

NIVEDITA'S WORK with Patrick Geddes in Paris lasted three weeks, and ended in failure.

The British scientist had been invited to take part in the Paris Exposition in 1900, as an organizer who would be responsible for the co-ordination and presentation, through daily lectures, of the subjects discussed at the International Science Congress, which was the Exposition's Summer School. He had planned to rely upon Nivedita to collate his documents, draw up reports and abstracts of his lectures, and establish, in three months, a specialized library. Instead of giving her complete independence, however, he looked upon her as a superior, and responsible, secretary. Each tried to co-operate with the other, but Nivedita realized almost at once that she lacked the qualities for a good writer of *précis*.

"I feel torn to pieces," she confessed in a letter to Miss MacLeod. "He wants a voice that will utter his thought as he would have done. I try, then, to make a mosaic in which the bright bits are his words, and I provide only grey cement of mere grammatical context. You can imagine how feeble this is!"

There was another basic disagreement between them, which was more serious. Geddes' thought probed the depths of a biologist who *knows* that pure science is the absolute truth. In spite of her admiration for him, and the value she set upon his friendship, Nivedita perceived a further absolute, beyond the relative . . .

Yet she worked hard and conscientiously for the short time that their association lasted. And this period of non-success was for her a new experience to be mastered.

The Boses arrived in Paris in early July. Their first visit was to the Geddes's, and the two scientists met with great cordiality, although in details of thought they did not always agree. Jagadis Bose had just submitted to the Science Congress his discovery of the electrical reactions in metals and in inorganic matter. And he satisfactorily proved his thesis of the existence in plants—"fully living creatures," he called them—of "an infinitely delicate nervous system."\* Now, he and his wife were caught up in a social whirl.

For Mrs. Leggett had taken a house in the Place des Etats-Unis, and her salon was the meeting-place for interesting and distinguished personages in many fields of intellectual activity. When Swami Vivekananda arrived, to be plunged into this elegant turmoil, she offered him a quiet retreat under her roof; but he chose instead to stay with one of his French disciples, Jules Bois, who lived alone in a small flat. He took a less and less important part in the social life that centered in "Lady Betty's" hospitable Paris home, and it was plain that he had only one idea: to go back to India.

He was almost overwhelmed by the practical difficulties that assailed his work at Belur, and left everything in the hands of Mrs. Bull. There was a pathos in the letter he wrote to her (she was in Brittany) at this time:

You will send me back to India, won't you? I am surer of your guidance than of my own. . . . What work I have to do, my powers, I passed over to you; I see it. I cannot any more *tell* from the platform. . . . I want rest. Not that I am tired, but the next phase will be the miraculous touch and not the tongue. Like Sri Ramakrishna's. . . . I am glad, I am resigned. Only get me out to India, won't you?

\* Jagadis Chandra Bose became professor emeritus at the Presidency College in Calcutta in 1915, and from then on devoted himself to the establishment of the research institute, in that city, which bears his name. He was knighted by the British Government in 1917. A study of his life and work, by Patrick Geddes, was published in 1920.

Yet he had one contact with the world of art—and life—which brought a disagreement with Nivedita. It was when he went to hear Emma Calvé sing *Carmen*.

Swami Vivekananda had seen the famous prima donna in America, where she had attended many of his lectures. Now, in Paris, he was glad to come to Mrs. Leggett's musical evenings to hear her sing.

"I should like to see you in your favorite role," he said to her. "What is it?"

Calvé blushed as she answered, "It's *Carmen*. Swamiji, you must pardon me, but every evening, in spite of myself, I become that woman when I sing and dance and play my castanets."

"I shall come and hear you," said the Swami.

At this point Nivedita broke into the conversation.

"But that's impossible," she said. "Swamiji, you can't go to the Opéra Comique; you will be severely criticized."

The Swami looked at her in astonishment. His only reply was a tender smile.

And, two evenings later, accompanied by Mr. Leggett, he not only went to hear the opera but was taken to the star's dressing-room during the intermission. Calvé received him with some embarrassment.

"I wanted to see your *Carmen*, Emma," he said. "Don't think she's a bad woman. She is just true. She does not lie. . . . And in her violence she expresses her soul. She is of that superb race of women who say to the Divine Mother, after they have prayed to Her, 'Don't listen to my prayers, O Mother of God, for I want to die of my desire.'"

The prima donna was at the Leggetts' again the next day, and the Swami said to her:

"Emma Calvé, would you sing for me that impetuous hymn that ended the performance? I should like to learn it."

"The 'Marseillaise?' " she said. "But it's a war song, Swamiji: the cannons roar, the soldiers scream. . . ."

"Yes, that's it exactly!" he insisted. "In it you feel an expression of courage, a call to love and sacrifice for your country, don't you? You imagine the citizen, undecided, rising in re-

sponse to a vision of power. It is a hymn I shall teach my novices!"

And years later, when Emma Calvé went to India and visited Belur Math, the monks asked her to sing "La Marseillaise," the hymn Swami Vivekananda had sung them. . . .

But now, in Paris, the Swami's whole attitude upset Nivedita completely. She saw very little of him, and every encounter they had was unhappy. It seemed impossible to regain their former intimacy. He had hardly listened to her report of the results of her American tour, and had refused to give her any advice in her disappointing association with Patrick Geddes. "I am free now, born free," he would tell her. "Nothing that I do is of any importance. I have become a child again." All his real interest was in getting to India quickly.

Even in the plans for his return there was a disagreement between them. Some of his friends talked of going with him as far as Egypt. Miss MacLeod and Emma Calvé spoke of a journey in easy stages through the Near East, and Nivedita was to be in the party. But there were others, highly esteemed in occult circles in Paris, who were to go with them, of whom she disapproved. She told the Swami that such a heteroclite company would bring him into disrepute, but he replied:

"Don't you worry about that! What does it matter? Know how to gather the flowers that open under your feet, praise everything, even if mud comes to spatter you! Is it our job to judge everything, in place of Him who is perfect Vision?"

The veiled quarrel that had smoldered between them blazed out. Nivedita stood her ground against him. And this he could not tolerate, though he loved her for it.

"You are obstinate and headstrong, all that I have been myself. But your actions still bear the imprint of will," he said. "Let the Divine Mother take care of you. Go and live in solitude, since you still differentiate evil from good. Seek within yourself the means of annihilating this distinction. How you will do this, I do not know. Deep down within yourself, the mold of every form must finally be broken, so that your spirituality can overflow. Only then will you be ready. You will pick

'up mud which dirties your hands, and with it model creatures and make them quiver with joy. Giving matters little: you must continually create."

"Create, always create," Nivedita repeated mechanically, without understanding. She saw people dancing about her like frenzied marionettes, and her guru going off, carried away by their mad rush. Why? As at least once before, she felt wholly separated from him. Trying to reconcile herself, she poured out her feeling—as so often—in a letter to Miss MacLeod:

I was not ready or worthy to accept the personal in him with the loving welcome that it should have had. . . . Swami has cut me off by a well-deserved stroke . . . and it is well somehow. I have nothing to live for but him and those Hindu women of the future who are to be his. And this is absolutely true today and never has been before. Is it not strange? Yet I do not feel that I can send him a letter or a messenger, or treat him otherwise than as if he were literally dead.

She strove to get the full meaning of the Swami's words: "Giving matters little; you must continually create." But, in this life, can any joy exist if one has to renounce giving? She thought and thought until she was able to see clearly that when one gives it is still an assertion of possession, supreme and subtle, even in sacrifice. And as she came out of the bewilderment of this discovery she saw also the mistake she had persisted in making ever since the moment when, receiving the *sannyasa*, she had asked the Divine Mother for a personal reward, a success to lay before her guru. She had worked *for him*, with a well-concealed attachment which she believed to be detachment, instead of *creating* continually to the glory of the Divine Mother. The Swami thus rejected all that she gave him: the offering of her superb work in America as well as the failure of her collaboration with Patrick Geddes in Paris. Free hands neither give nor receive.

Humility, aspiration, and the suffering of personal emotion spoke in a letter written at this time to Mrs. Bull:

We seem to be in a thorn-grown twilight, all of us, and there is no getting out. The most futile will-o'-the-wisps in

the whole wilderness are those dreams of helping others, that lead us farther into the morass of hope. . . . One does not desire to receive, but the dream of giving dies hard. But at least one can suffer! How futile is the expedient! . . . The vanity, the meddlesomeness, the self-assertion, the pride and contempt and impatience toward others, that are never dead! They are less mean, perhaps, than the love of comfort, but they are twenty thousand times more impossible to slay. . . . With equal candor, and more personally, she continued:

It is to *know* that one so longs. To know. There is something big. We are conscious of our own love, even in our powerlessness and despair. We require to be conscious of that which is behind all such limitations. *It is*. Certainly, we do not know it. Nor do I see any hope of reaching it for oneself unless Swami will give it by a miracle. That is what I have come to now. A mere universe and him. And sullen tolerance of things. Will he give it? Will he give it? Alas . . . but tell you this in a whisper, he cannot. For I have seen him try before. He would have done it already if he could. He has it, and the power to give. But something depends on oneself—and that is not there, of course it is not. Has one desired so greatly as to lose anything by it? Has one sacrificed mind, comfort, and affection for the desire? What did they sacrifice, Sri Ramakrishna and he? What did they not sacrifice, rather?"

Mrs. Bull's reply to this poignant outcry was an invitation to Nivedita to join her in Brittany. "The sea air will soothe your suffering," she wrote.

But in Brittany Nivedita continued to suffer, engrossed in her own desolation and self-questioning. At last she tried to write to her guru, but her letter was clumsily written, stressing the sufferings, and the very elements, of their quarrel.

He replied with moving humility:

Your letter reached me just now. . . .

Now I am free, as I have kept no power or authority or position for me in the work. I also have resigned the Presidency of the Ramakrishna mission.

I am so glad a whole load is off me, now I am happy . . . I no longer represent anybody, nor am I responsible to anybody. As to my friends I had a morbid sense of obligation. I have thought well and find I owe nothing to anybody, if anything, I have given my best energies unto death almost and received only hectoring and mischief-making and botheration.

Your letter indicates that I am jealous of your new friends. You must know once and for all I was born without jealousy, without avarice, without the desire to rule, whatever other vices I was born with.

I never directed you before; now after I am nobody in the work, I have no direction whatever. I only know this much, so long as you serve the Divine Mother with a whole heart, She will be your guide.

I never had any jealousy about what friends you made. I never criticized my brethren for mixing up in anything. Only I do believe the Western people have the peculiarity of trying to force upon others whatever seems good to them, forgetting that what is good for you may not be good for others. As such I am afraid you would try to force upon others whatever turn your mind might take in contact with new friends. That was the only reason I sometimes tried to stop any particular influence, and nothing else.

You are free, have your own choice, your own work . . . Friends or foes, they are all instruments in the hands of the Mother to help us work out our karma, through pleasure or pain. As such the Divine Mother blesses them all.

With all love and blessings, yours truly,

VIVEKANANDA

Nivedita read this letter and wept with shame. "You fool," she said to herself, "can't you pull out the tare that is choking you?" She tramped about the windswept moors and came back ready to drop with exhaustion; but she came to a firm and clear determination at last:

"I shall stay in Europe, and work there, until I have destroyed within myself every trace of the enthusiasm awakened by Swami Vivekananda, until the memory of him is dead within me, until

I have nothing more to ask of him. Where must I go? Oh! my Divine Mother, am I to choose the purifying action for which Thou intendest me? I yield all intelligence to Thee."

She wrote Miss MacLeod of her decision, and added: "But I see you standing by Swami's side for years to come. . . . Some day I shall come and kiss the hem of your garment because I shall love him as you do, having learned it through separation and through you. How strange!"

It was Mrs. Bull who provided the answer to the question of where Nivedita was to go. Some months previously the Swami had written to her: "I have given Nivedita to you, and I am sure you will always take care of her." Now she invited her to spend the winter in London. Jagadis Bose and his wife were to be there too.

A few days before Nivedita was to leave Perros-Guirec, Miss MacLeod arrived unexpectedly, and only a few hours later the Swami himself, coming as a herald of peace.

He asked Nivedita no questions. She was going into the unknown, without plan, without foreknowledge. He was quiet. But, as Nivedita was to write in her book about Vivekananda, *My Master as I Saw Him* "the thought may have crossed his mind that old ties were perilous to a foreign alliance. He had seen so many betrayals that he seemed always to be ready for a new desertion. The moment was critical for us, and this he did not fail to realize."

On the last evening he called Nivedita to go with him for a walk in the garden. It was to give her his blessing. "When a great man has prepared his workers, he must go to another place," he said, "for he cannot make them free in his own presence. I am nothing more for you. I have handed over to you the power that I possessed; now I am only a wandering monk. There is a peculiar sect of Mohammedans who are reported to be so fanatical that they take every newborn babe and expose it, saying, 'If God made thee, perish. If Ali made thee, live.' Now what they say to the child I say, but in the opposite sense, to you tonight: Go forth into the world, and there, if I made you, be destroyed. If the Divine Mother made you, live."



"I am going away," she answered. "O you who were my guru, my king, my father, be blessed Your kindness and your magnificence are infinite. *Jaya! Jaya!* Sir Ramakrishna has put his hand on my shoulder."

The next morning, at sunrise, Nivedita climbed into the peasant's cart which was to take her to the railroad station. Where the road dipped into the woods, she turned. In the rosy light, Swami Vivekananda was standing motionless by the roadside, his joined hands raised above his head, blessing her.

Six years later, she wrote to Mrs. Bull.

You remember that Swamiji made me free to see things a little ahead, and plan. If I were to die I think that I would like you to take the Bairn [her nickname for Jagadis Bose] to Brittany and show him the garden in which Swamiji gave me that great final blessing—his apostolic charge to me.

## 28. *New Points of View*

It WAS a cold, foggy evening in late October when Nivedita arrived in London with Dr. and Mrs. Bose. The Boses were tired, and could scarcely breathe in the heavy dampness. Nivedita herself shivered. Yet it was precisely in the cab, traversing the dark streets, that she remembered an exquisite parable of Sri Ramakrishna:

"When the star Svati is in the ascendant, the pearl oyster, which has risen to the surface of the waters, floats there with its shell wide open, until a drop of rain falls into it. Then it plunges down and hides itself in the deep, until it has made of that drop of rain a marvelous pearl."

Nivedita said to herself: "This fog and wet will now enclose me. It is a symbol. I shall be alone with myself, living inside my tightly closed shell. O blessed dew of Svati, work within me, transform me! A day will come when I shall understand everything better."

She had hoped to invite the Boses to her mother's house, but found Mary Noble not strong enough now to entertain guests. Her brother Richmond, meanwhile, had joined forces with Octavius Beatty in the pursuit of a political career, taking an active part in the general controversy which was then raging over the Boer War, and was not in the least afraid of attacking the government. Nivedita, too, soon found herself in active debate with a responsible government official in carrying out what became, instinctively, her London program: "I do for India," as she put it in a letter, "everything that comes my way."

And although she could not offer Dr. Bose a haven in her mother's home, she could and did replace Mrs. Bull, who had not yet reached London, in helping him with his work and in surrounding him, insofar as was possible, with an atmosphere of peace and quiet. He was to present his experiments to the Royal Society. He had two assistants working with him. He was ill, and knew that he would soon have to undergo an operation. He was tyrannical, and when a day of work passed without result he was apt to fall into a mood of irritation. He was depressed and harassed by the sense of a constant struggle dictated by race prejudice. Every lecture he gave represented a cruel effort, and hours would be spent in drawing and re-drawing scientific diagrams and verifying calculations. "My paper will probably come next week," he wrote in November to Mrs. Bull, who was to come for the day: "Then, too, I feel some restraint, as some of the important things which I recently did with crude, homely apparatus are capable of much improvement and far-reaching development with proper apparatus. If I give out the idea of my method, and do not continue the work myself, better results will be brought forward, and my work will appear ridiculously crude."

The presentation before the Royal Society passed off successfully. When it was over, Bose went into a nursing home, and the necessary operation was performed in December. Nivedita took turns with his wife in looking after the sick man during his convalescence, and now she could offer him the hospitality of her mother's house, since Mary Noble had gone to the country. Meanwhile, however, she had had her brush with authority, on behalf of Indian scholarship in general and Jagadis Bose's work in particular.

This was when Jamsetji Naraswanji Tata, celebrated Parsee industrialist, merchant, and philanthropist, arrived in London from Bombay to press his plan for the founding of an independent university for Indians, with Indian funds, and to find out why his project had, so far, been blocked. He was anxious to meet Sir George Birdwood, who was in charge of educational affairs in the India Office; and in order to bring this about under

the most favorable conditions Mrs. Bull, who kept open house, gave a luncheon at which Nivedita was the fourth guest.

In the course of a conversation which was being carried on brilliantly from all sides, she asked Sir George whether there was any hope that account would be taken solely of the applicants' scientific qualifications when state appointments were made in the future. He replied that this was impossible.

"And do you not think that such a state of things involves the gravest dangers?" she asked.

"It ought to do so," the government official admitted, "but I do not for one moment believe that it does. The people of India will never rise against us. They are all vegetarians!"

"I was thinking of dangers to India, not to ourselves," Nivedita said.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," Sir George responded. "True, that point of view would be very interesting."

The coffee had arrived before Mr. Tata had had an opportunity of broaching the subject which lay so heavily on his own mind. And then it was Nivedita who opened fire.

"What form of regulation would you propose, Sir George," she asked, "in order to secure the appointment of Hindus of outstanding merit to the professional chairs in an Indian university as planned by Mr. Tata?"

Mr. Tata's plan was, in fact, that an equal number of Parsee, Moslem, Hindu, and Christian professors should constitute the Administrative Committee of such a university. Now Sir George stared at Nivedita.

"I would propose nothing!" he said. "It would be suicidal to the interests of science to do anything of the sort. That is a world question, not an Indian problem at all!"

No further discussion was possible. "Write me an open letter in *The Times*," Sir George said to Mr. Tata. "I will reply officially. I assure you, your point of view is very interesting."

Nivedita, listening, was planning her own campaign. "What Sir George refuses to do, I shall do instead," she was saying to herself. "And, through the efforts of thousands of Hindu intel-

lectuals, an India will be born with which England will not be associated."

That same evening she sent the Boses a note, describing what had happened. "My dearest Two, send me immediately a list of the first-class Indians who are groveling in English universities," she wrote. "Choose scientists, lawyers, doctors, linguists. I am adopting them. I don't know yet what I can do for them, but I shall spare no effort on their behalf."

This was a long distance from that early point of view which had heralded Swami Vivekananda's work as an aid to Britain's peaceful domination of India! But it was characteristic of Margaret Noble's mind that she was never afraid of growth or change. And during this stay in London she found herself receptive to a new philosophical attitude, as well.

Recovering from his illness, Jagadis Bose spent hours reading with Nivedita. In the rigid puritan atmosphere of her mother's home, Nivedita became his pupil and, under his tutelage, assimilated the entire Brahmo-Samaj philosophy, and even its tradition. It seemed to her that this was a necessary step.

There has been a tremendous resolution on his side to overcome, for he felt that honor would never permit my hearing his views from him [she wrote to Miss MacLeod]. But, at last, I think I am getting it all. And I am throwing myself into it completely, as I think Sri Ramakrishna would wish me to do, and am trying, if that might be, to reach God that way. You will remember that I did not love even Shiva and Kali at first. Even Sri Ramakrishna cannot have loved all religions equally. . . . And sometimes I am quite clear that the call and the effort come straight from Sri Ramakrishna himself. And at other times I think of Swami and shudder—for I do not think he would understand or approve. And to be disapproved of by him is still the uttermost depth to me. . . . Moreover, I seem to be casting away all that I have lived for, all that it has been Freedom to possess.

The Sunday after she wrote this letter, Nivedita spoke from

the pulpit of a church in Tunbridge Wells; and there, as she wrote, an "extraordinary thing" came to her.

I found myself taking the *highest* part of everything Swami has ever given us. Then I understood in a flash that my notion about Brahmoism had a kind of call to me to do this . . . which I should never have done, perhaps, without that invitation from another's need. So I am able to realize that I really may have been using Images to thwart and blind my vision of the One . . . and that until I have achieved that vision I may not go back to the Image. I cannot tell you the peace of this discovery. And is it not a wonderful proof of the truth of *Advaita* [the knowledge of the Divine without form] that Swami is so tremendous, that every path means faithfulness to him? He is so large that as long as you are faithful to Truth and to yourself, you cannot be in antagonism to him.

Jagadis Bose was also enjoying a harvest of achievement at this time. A regular correspondence had been established between him and the Curies, and he exchanged regular visits with Thomas Huxley. Nivedita commented, in a letter:

It is extraordinary to see Dr. Bose: how the old idea of Advaita behind him saves him from errors that other men of science walk into blindfold. . . . He is now like one who walks on air. Discovery succeeds discovery, one instrument follows another, and the brilliant intuition becomes the measured fact. It is with breathless awe that one watches. How can the Divine Mother pour out Her spirit so abundantly?

Nivedita herself was torn between the wish to return to work in India and the execution of a full program of work in London. On the one hand, there was news every week from Miss MacLeod, who had rejoined Swami Vivekananda; and in March, Sri Sarada Devi sent such an urgent summons to return that Nivedita looked up sailings. On the other hand, she was accomplishing a great deal where she was. She lectured three times a week, to raise money for her school, and she wrote many articles, which were accepted by widely read magazines. In

February she had gone for a fortnight's lecture tour to Scotland, where she had visited Patrick Geddes; and he offered her the lectureship of the Indian section of the Glasgow Exposition. In Scotland, too, she collected more than twelve hundred pounds for her work in India, and this, to her great regret, aroused the envy of the Christian Missionary Societies. Through the medium of the *Westminster Gazette* they engaged in a brief controversy, but Nivedita's essay, "Lambs among Wolves," a reluctant and painful survey of the intolerance shown by Christian missionaries toward followers of another religion, was the only episode in a conflict which she abandoned at once.

When she returned from Scotland she found another sphere of useful activity, through the advice and with the co-operation of Romesh Chunder Dutt, a member of the faculty of history at the University of London, a friend of Dr. Bose, a poet and translator who had brought out abridged versions of the *Ramayana* and *Nahabharata* in English verse. After twenty-five years in the Civil Service, Dr. Dutt had made London the headquarters for his work for India. Now Nivedita came to him and said:

"Tell me about the India which you teach your pupils, with its economic and financial core. Show me the parallel developments of East and West."

Soon some ten or more Indians, Dr. Dutt's students, were coming regularly to study with Nivedita; and she herself found this the best means of becoming really acquainted with them. She learned of their mad hopes and bitter disappointments, and she felt how alike they all were: on guard against themselves, ashamed of feeling the ill effects of the cold climate, humbled in the other students' eyes by the respect they paid to their own customs, faithfully imitating the Kipling characters which formed the image of India to the English. Nivedita listened as they talked and discussed with them the problem, which was so important to them, of the industrialization of India.

At the suggestion of Romesh Chunder Dutt she also began work on a book, *The Web of Indian Life*, which was to group together the delightful stories she told in her lectures, and in

which, also, she recognized the influence of Patrick Geddes. "To understand a little of Europe indirectly gave me a method by which to interpret my Hindu experience," she wrote. Early chapters treated of the Hindu woman as wife, and discussed the castes of India. When she spoke of going back to India, Dr. Dutt insisted that she stay to finish the book. Believing that the length of her European sojourn depended upon Swami Vivekananda, he also wrote to the Swami (to whom he was distantly related): "For the good of India you must postpone Nivedita's return." But every mail brought more urgent demands. Miss MacLeod, who was now in Japan, even threatened to accuse her of unfaithfulness.

Finally Nivedita wrote to Sri Sarada Devi that she was coming back, but she could fix no definite date of departure. It was May now, and she was more torn by uncertainty than ever. She wanted to go. Yes, she wanted desperately to go—but not to India. She needed space and solitude to make a decision. But where was she to go for that?

It was again Mrs. Bull who came to the rescue, with the suggestion of Norway and the wilderness retreat built by her musician husband on the rocks by the seashore. Here was the solution! Nivedita left for Bergen in the middle of the month. She went alone, but friends were to join her later.

She felt that, as in the parable, the moment had come for her, to open the oyster shell and look within at the pearl born of a raindrop.



## 29. *The New Resolve*

IN NORWAY, where the forests come down to the sea, Nivedita lived for three weeks entirely alone. Sitting on the ground, with her back propped against a tree, she worked at her book. Or she would go for a walk in the woods, with the household's two dogs as her companions, while the sea wind blew in gusts among the pines and flattened the moorland heather. In the evening the two old servants, who knew not one word of English, lighted a huge log fire in her room and brought her a tray with piles of black bread, butter, and a jug of fresh cream.

She was in fact standing on her own feet, reveling in the freedom she had acquired, and her letters reveal the resolutions she took, which were to change the entire course of her life. She seems to have been impelled by contradictory forces, but actually her aim was single and clear: to enlist herself in the service of India.

"I want to do and do, and never dream any more," she wrote. "I made up my mind never to go back to India unless I was strong. I went to rent, for very little, the hut where Gopaler Ma lived." The aged devotee of Sri Ramakrishna—already an old woman when Nivedita came to know her—had lived a life of harsh austerity in the hut where Nivedita now wished to settle; and the wish itself was a consecration, without fear of poverty.

Development, as well as determination, was summed up in a few sentences in a letter written to Mrs. Bull in June, in this year of 1901:

Freedom means something to me. My life has come to

include many elements that Swami would probably never have put there. They are all for him however. I trust in the end, and he will not hold me less his child than before. . . . I belong to my work, to the women and the girls. And I belong to Hinduism more than I ever did. But I see the political need so clearly too! That is all I mean—and to that I must be true. I believe now that I have something to do for grown-up India and for Indian men. How I shall be allowed to do that something, is the Divine Mother's business, not mine. . . .

The period of solitude came to an end at the beginning of July, when Romesh Chunder Dutt arrived from England, followed soon after by Mrs. Bull and several other guests. Nivedita and Dr. Dutt were working, and the presence of the others scarcely interrupted their activity. The Indian scholar—whom Nivedita called “my grandfather”—was giving her a good preparation for her future task.

“You are likely to be asked to speak at the Congress,” he said to her one day. “What will you do then?”

“If I am asked I shall accept, for I shall have something to say,” she declared.

Several times already, during these months that were so crucial to her personally, Nivedita had asserted, “Sooner or later, my work will be recognized as real politics.” She did not make the statement without sadness, for she knew exactly where she disagreed with her guru. She had written this to Nell Hammond. In later letters, to Miss MacLeod, she was forthright and detailed.

When I read Swami on Hinduism again, I am staggered at the vastness of it. It is too big for one generation. It needs a point. . . . I keep on more and more seeing that what I once saw as true for an individual is true for communities. You may employ an artist to teach Baby painting, and they may touch up her work so that it seems marvellous, but one little scrawl that is really her own is worth thousands of such pictures. And so with countries. What they grow to is good, what is done for them is a painted show.

I am doing nothing for India. I am learning and galvanizing. I am trying to see how the plant grows. When I have really understood that, I shall know that there is nothing to be done, except defense, I fancy. India was absorbed in study; a gang of robbers came upon her and destroyed her land. The mood is broken. Can the robbers teach her anything? No. She has to turn them out and go back to where she was before. Something like that, I fancy, is the true program for India. England's course is not yet run, but I long with all my heart for the day when it shall be. And I pray that I may be reincarnated to cry "Young India!" when the time comes to snatch the country's freedom from us, as the very youngest and most earnest of recruits may have shouted by Mazzini's side in the days of the freeing of Italy.

And so [she wrote, firmly] I shall have nothing to do with Christian or government agencies so long as they are foreign. That which is India for India, I touch the feet of, however stupid and futile. Anything else will do little good and much harm, and I have nothing to do with it.

Yes, my way will do some harm, too, but it will be *vital* to the people themselves—good or evil of their own, not anyone else's—and for such harm I care nothing. They need it. O India, India! Who shall undo this awful deed of my nation to you? Who shall atone for one of the million bitter insults showered daily on the bravest and keenest, most spirited and best of all your sons?

How silly I think it now to do anything in England for India! I cannot tell you! What usser waste of time! Do you think ravening wolves can be made gentle as babes? Can be made polite and sweet like little girls? That is what work in England for India means. Work is needed there, must be done there, I know. But do you know what that work is? People must come to England like Swamiji, like Dr. Bose, like Mr. Dutt, and must show what India is and can be. They must make friends and disciples and lovers by the million. And so in twenty years from now\*, when the blow

It was forty-six years later, in 1947, that India became a nation.

is struck (I know that it will be), there will suddenly be a body of men and women in England, who never thought of themselves in that light before, to rise up and say, "Hands off! This people *shall be free!*" But this is the redeeming of England, it is not work done for India. Do you see? And I for one am not made for that. I wish to heaven Swami would feel that he were—yet what do I know about his mission? It is past our meaning. . . .

O Yum, in India we want—what do we not want? We want the very dust of the earth to carry our message for us. We want the slow-growing formative processes put well to work. Do not think I can be forgetful of the planting of trees, the training of children, the farming of land. But we want also the ringing cry, the passion of the multitude, the longing for death. And we cannot do without these. When I think of our needs, I am in despair, but when I remember that the time is ripe and that "Mother" works, not me, I take courage again.

All we have to do is float with the tide, anywhere it may take us; to speak the whole word that comes to us; to strike the blow on the instant of heat. We hope that we shall not fail. My task is to see, and to make others see. The rest does itself. The vision is the great crisis. . . .

I hope, Yum dear, that in your large heart there is room for all this. . . . If it seems to you that I am all wrong and all dangerous, I can only touch your feet and give you my endless gratitude, and go my ways. I must work out the vision that is granted to me.

In these letters Nivedita had traced the plan of her future work.

One morning in late September she said suddenly to her friends, "I am ready to go back to India. The road is now open before me. I must rejoin Swami Vivekananda as soon as possible."

This abrupt decision cut short the long hesitations of Mrs.

Bull, who was preparing to join Miss MacLeod in Japan. There had been some talk of Nivedita going with her, but the plans for that journey had remained vague. Now, Nivedita hastened her departure for India. Her preparations were soon completed. In London she stayed in the convent of the Sisters of Bethany, a Protestant community, while waiting, the last few days, for her sailing.

On her last day in England she wrote again to Miss MacLeod. In this letter, the name of her guru was constantly repeated.

Do you think I do not know that the great message of my sweet Father is unique? That, I could never forget; but beyond that I do not understand. For all this past year I have been going through experiences that lie far outside his course for me. I have held so hard to Sri Ramakrishna, the while, that if at any point I have been wrong I can only count it His fault, not mine. And yet it may well be that the place it is all to take in my future life is to be that of a warning, or even sorrow. I cannot tell. It is not necessary to understand. It is only necessary to be faithful; and I have done my best.

It has seemed to me part of all this that I have had these new views of India, and that I could not otherwise have reached them—though, again, how they are to be made widely available I cannot even guess, nor, indeed, if they are ever to be of any consequence at all. And I am dying down into a feeling of greater quiet than I have ever had. Is this a part of the preparation? It may be that it marks the decline of efficiency beyond the climax, but, again, if so, it is "Mother's fault." I did my best. She takes what She will.

This letter was written on the 3rd of October, 1901. Nivedita made the journey without the company of any friends. She wanted to be alone on the pier when she left England, and alone in India to meet Sarada Devi and her guru.

She had just learned that Swami Vivekananda was gravely ill.

## 30. *Reunion—and Loss*

WHEN NIVEDITA reached Belur, in November, 1901, Swami Vivekananda was not at the monastery door to welcome her. Although she had half-expected it, his absence was a blow. Several of the monks were standing beneath the portico, talking. When she demanded, "How is Swamiji? Take me to him!" their eyes filled with tears.

They knew that his condition was hopeless, and yet their hopes were renewed daily. Swami Vivekananda was only thirty-eight years old, and he fought with all the strength of a man still young. For several months, now, the monks had seen him sometimes paralyzed with diabetes and choking with asthma, sometimes in the grasp of a feverish activity that made the most zealous of them tremble. He submitted with a childish simplicity to all his doctors' regimes. But he resigned himself also to suffering; and to die, for him, was merely to abandon a worn-out body as one would cast off a soiled and torn garment after a long day's work. He spent most of his time, and received his callers, in a large and well-ventilated room which opened on the second-floor veranda. Visitors would come in by the two French windows and sit on the red tiled floor around the Swami's bed.

There was a moving triumph for him in Nivedita's return. He saw in her eyes the true being that she had discovered within herself. When she came to see him he assigned her the place of honor at his side.

The younger monks, too, crowded around her, seeking opportunities to speak with her and to be of service. This contact with their heartwarming enthusiasm gave her a chance to assess her own complete inner transformation. Some time later, she summed this up:

"To become the instrument I now am, I have worked unceasingly for four years. My spiritual education was begun at Belur, the day I received my name. . . . I can see now that Swamiji was longing for someone to pour his own mind and thought into. Oh, that I may never harden my nature so as to lose one atom of it! . . . And at Ridgely Manor the training ended, and I was sent out into the world. There followed a night of foggy darkness, which enveloped my soul for two years, and from which, thanks to my guru, I emerged. I am but in a state of constant awareness. Life is only translatable as Freedom. Without that, death is far better. . . . When a miserable terror holds me by the throat and bids me choose that which is not highest and best, I trust Shiva will slay me dead rather than leave me to yield."

In her work, no specific decisions were reached during the first weeks after her return. She wished to have her school open before Miss MacLeod's expected arrival from Japan, but she had not yet found a house in Bagh Bazar, and for the time being she found it convenient to stay with the American Consul and his wife in the city. The Indian National Congress was meeting in Calcutta for a few days that winter, and the town was full of people. In the Indian quarter the crowd was unusually agitated: the narrow twisting streets and the inner courtyards of the Hindu houses had become meeting-places where students gathered around their leaders and fervently discussed the political issues of the Congress. Troops of horsemen at the main crossroads, and local police armed with sticks, were prepared for any disturbance. In these circumstances, and under Swami Vivekananda's personal direction, Nivedita was renewing her contact with the Indian way of life.

It was thus that quite privately she met several influential members of the National Congress, from the different provinces,

who came to Belur to pay homage to the Swami, and was present at discussions which were dominated by his spirit and personality. These men called him the "Patriot Saint," and found strength and inspiration in his presence; he made them see their own responsibility by meeting their problems squarely with them. Just as Sri Ramakrishna, without knowing any books, had been a living epitome of the *Vedanta*, so was Vivekananda of national life. One day one of the political leaders remarked that he himself had behind him "all the Mahrattas," while another leader had "all the Bengalis."

"But where are the masses?" asked Swami Vivekananda. "The gist of everything is the elevation of the masses without injury to religion. Spend your money on education!"

With a single sentence—"Man-making, man-making is my task!"—he sowed fruitful ideas in the minds of his hearers.

Mohandas Gandhi, attending this session without office, was among the men who visited the Swami and whom Nivedita met at Belur. During the evenings many of the delegates set up among themselves, at the monk's side, a kind of "private National Congress," discussing at length their problems.

One of the subjects Swami Vivekananda was never tired of expounding was the sin of intolerance. "Is there a more despicable crime," he would demand, "than that of the bigoted Hindu who, turning to the *rights* of the past, only obeys their laws, and refuses to see God in man, his brother?" He spoke of a policy of tolerance and comprehension, which, on his lips, became synonymous with practical religion. He would go on with such teaching for hours on end.

And often he would call Nivedita to him, interrupting the discussion in Bengali to ask her opinion in English. Sometimes when he was tired she spoke for him. And she and other monks always saw the visitors back to Calcutta, and established a personal contact with them in that way.

Meanwhile, Miss MacLeod arrived with two Japanese friends: Prince Oda, who was a Buddhist Abbot, and Kakuso Okakura, a painter and man of wide culture. They had come to invite Swami Vivekananda to attend a Congress of Religions



to be held in their country; and, forgetting his illness, the Swami thought of nothing but an enthusiastic welcome to the two Buddhists. Abbot Oda was the very person he had been looking for, to go with him on his last pilgrimage to Budh-Gaya where, after burning sticks of incense, he would cast his body into the dust under the sacred Bo tree and offer it in full prostration to the all-compassionate Buddha. He would pray also at Benares, for his mother had dedicated him to Shiva at his birth. He would bathe in the Ganges, and would put on his forehead the gray ashes of the last sacrifice.

Ill as he was, the Swami was determined to make this pilgrimage, and did. Both Miss MacLeod and Kakuso Okakura went with him. The Japanese painter was an artist who had refused high honors rather than accept restrictions on his freedom, and a patriot who had seen danger for his own country in the material force of the West and had not been afraid to stand up and denounce it. He won high regard in India and formed many lasting friendships there. He held an official position in Japan as Chairman of the Committee for the Restoration of Old Temples, and it was in this capacity, as well as personally, that he had come to receive Swami Vivekananda's darshan.

The pilgrimage was over in a few days, but the Swami came back exhausted and scarcely able to breathe. Mountain air was a necessity, and he set out for Mayavati, accompanied by Nivedita and a few of his monks. He was indeed an invalid now, and Nivedita cared for him tenderly.

"He is so ill," she wrote, "that my attitude is that of soothing by any concession, at any time, without troubling about sincerity or consistency, but at all hazards guarding from him what is sacred to myself and others."

At the same time, she had made herself a link between her guru, shut in by a wall of suffering, and his mission, which was being increasingly fulfilled. For hours through the day and night she wrote for the *Prabuddha Bharata*, but later she gave this up, because Swami Swarupananda only offered her a field in which her pen was not free enough. Under such conditions she felt that any articles from her would be useless.

When Swami Vivekananda returned to Belur his old companions saw from his face that the end was not far off. They drew closer around him than ever, watching over him day and night. But he, on his part, ruling every detail of monastery life from his sickroom, made the daily routine stricter than ever. He decreed that there should be only one meal a day, with a light "snack" at night, and ordered a study class in the afternoon to do away with any possibility of a siesta. He himself rose about 3 a. m. to lead the monks in fervent meditation. Sometimes he would go for a walk along the Ganges, and would feed the tame animals he had adopted—a dog and a goat, a stork and an antelope. Even when prostrate with illness he enjoined a rigorous austerity upon himself, with long hours of silence. And any breach of his stern rules, on the monks' part, was rebuked with great severity.

Taking part with the monks in the silent meditations at the Swami's side, Nivedita was sometimes seized with the longing for some direct spiritual revelation. She thought constantly of her guru's experiences in the garden of Cossipore several days before the death of Sri Ramakrishna, as he had related it to her: "It was in the evening, at the hour of meditation, I lost the consciousness of the body, and felt that it was absolutely non-existent; I felt that the sun, moon, space, time, ether, and all had been reduced to a homogeneous mass and then melted far away into the unknown. But I had just a trace of the feeling of ego, so that I could return again to the world of relativity. At my side, Sri Ramakrishna consoled me: "If you remain day and night in that state, the work of the Divine Mother will not be accomplished. . . . When your work is finished, it will come again."

Was it about to "come" soon, that divine felicity? Nivedita was afraid of the slightest noise that might bring the Swami back to consciousness of himself. She would have liked to send away many of the disciples, for during these hours of peace some of them brought him the burden of their own troubles still. It was not surprising that he sometimes said, in tears, "Why have you called me? I cannot give you an answer. I am already on the path toward the great meeting-place."

It was perhaps because Nivedita made no demands upon him—not even that of getting his consent to what she was doing—that the Swami confided in her before he died.

She had recently rented a house in Bagh Bazar for her school, and as she was going out of the door, on the morning of June 28th, she met Swami Vivekananda himself, with two of the monks, coming to see her.

"*Jaya, jaya*, glory to the guru!" she said, greeting the Swami as a divine guest.

He went into the house alone, touched the pillars of the door, the threshold, the walls of dried earth, and the trunk of the fig tree in the courtyard. Then he went upstairs and sat on the deerskin rug there. It was a rug which he had used for his own meditations, and which he had lately given to Nivedita as a present.

"I like this house," he said at last, when she had joined him. "It will suit your work. Never forget to worship God in the tiny child, for grandeur lies hidden in the worm." He was looking about as he spoke, playing with the figures of polished earthenware that Nivedita had collected for her future pupils and becoming quite excited in the discovery of a magic lantern, a microscope, and a camera.

"Come to Belur tomorrow morning," he said. "I want you to describe your plan of work to the monks."

This was more than Nivedita had ever hoped. As the Swami was leaving, she stammered, "Swamiji, when the school opens its doors, will you come and give it your blessing?"

He smiled, and made a vague gesture. Then he laid his hand on her shoulder and, in the gentle tone she had heard him use before, he replied, "I am always blessing you."

Next day the Swami seemed transfigured, and showed no signs of suffering. In the presence of the monks he drew Nivedita into a long conversation about the future of the school. They talked all morning, until the noontide heat rose. Sensing that the novices did not always understand Nivedita, he did not hesitate to bring her complex nature to light—for, like him, she often seemed to be several people rolled into one, though

with one heart and one mind. Before she went away he twice took her head in his hands and blessed her tenderly. A few weeks before this, he had written to her:

My dear Nivedita, may all powers come unto you! May the Divine Mother Herself be your hands and mind! It is immense power—irresistible—that I pray for you, and, if possible, along with it infinite peace. . . . If there was any truth in Sri Ramakrishna, may he take you into his leading, even as he did me—nay, a thousand times more!

She remembered that letter now. She felt calm. And she was certain that she was understood by her guru.

The days that followed were trying, however, even to the point of being extremely painful. The heat was suffocating, enervating. The long-expected rains did not come. There was not a breath of wind: only dust that hung in the air, and a dampness as heavy as lead. In the seclusion of her house at Bagh Bazar, Nivedita went on working. In the courtyard, near the well, crows were cawing. Indoors, the only sound was the servant's shuffling step. When four days had elapsed since Swami Vivekananda's visit, she felt an overwhelming desire to see him again. Although she knew she was not expected, she set out for Belur.

It was the eleventh day of the moon, a day known as *ekadashi*, set aside by the Hindus for fasting and prayer. She was not surprised by the quiet that held sway in the monastery. A tune played on the cithar drifted out through an open window, and, elsewhere, she could hear the low voice of a pandit teaching a Hindu text. There was no other sound. A gardener lay asleep on the ground.

As soon as Swami Vivekananda heard that Nivedita was there, he asked that she be brought to his room. And Nivedita, face to face with her guru, knew why she had come. She knew, too, that he also understood. This was the last farewell.

The Swami ordered a meal to be prepared for her—vegetable curry, rice, fruits, and curds. She tried to refuse, but he insisted upon waiting on her, and plainly enjoyed it. He was at once high-spirited and earnest, introducing happy memories of the

past into the intimate solemnity of the present moment. After the meal, when one of the novices brought in a jug of water and a towel, and she was about to rise, the Swami seized them, and, leaning toward her without a word, he slowly poured the water over her hands and wiped them with the towel. Nivedita felt embarrassed.

"Swamiji, I should be in your place," she stammered, "and you in mine."

A smile hovered about the monk's lips.

"Jesus washed the feet of His disciples," he murmured.

"Yes, of course, on the last day—" The words froze on her tongue. She closed her eyes. The Swami recited a blessing, and she felt his look of love.

Nivedita went home with the feeling of a miser who was carrying off a treasure: a treasure of serenity and quietude whose price she did not know. This mood continued until the next morning. A monk came from Belur then, bringing a new loaf which the Swami had had baked for her. Bread in India? She was about to take it when she noticed something strange in the monk's attitude: he was holding the loaf before her like a priest lifting up the Host. Then she saw that the loaf had been cut—prasada! The guru was sharing a sacrament with her. She raised the bread to her forehead.

"Blessed am I to be the daughter of Swami."

She looked around the sun-scorched courtyard. Her soul, full to overflowing, transformed it into a luxuriant garden, cool, full of shade. "Let the earth become a paradise to reflect my joy!" her spirit cried. "Let the heavens multiply to contain my peace!"

All day she had a vivid sense of her guru's nearness. Then in the evening she went up to the roof terrace to meditate, her face toward the northeast. The palm trees were swaying in the breeze. It was the black night of the new moon and its mysterious sweetness was irresistible. She had the feeling that her guru stood in front of her and that she was trying to catch his eye, but the anxious disciples who surrounded him screened his face from her. She became impatient. Suddenly her thought

swept far away on the night breeze, to Shiva, the Guru of gurus; then everything disappeared. She was at the same time the diffuse clearness, the sound, the breath—and then everything faded. She experienced a long moment of ecstasy, controlled by a force that was not her own. When she came to herself again, her cheeks were wet with tears. She knew that something tremendous had happened, which she attributed to her guru; and her heart leaped with joy.

It was not yet dawn, the next morning, when a messenger knocked at her door. He had an open letter in his hand; it was signed "Sadananda," and she read:

My dear Nivedita, the end has come. Swamiji fell asleep yesterday at nine, never to wake again.

Swami Vivekananda had died on July 4th, 1902.

Nivedita went at once to Belur, with the messenger. The news had already spread through the neighborhood, and many people were hurrying in the same direction.

When she reached the monastery, she went straight up to the Swami's room. The shutters were closed. Flies were buzzing in the darkness. The body of her guru, robed in the ochre yellow and covered with yellow flowers, lay on a mat on the floor.

She sat down beside him, lifted his head and laid it on her knees. She picked up a bamboo fan that was laying there, and for a long time she fanned the beloved face.

She gave no sign of sorrow. Her grief was dead. She remembered what the Swami had told her at Amarnath: "*A great favor has been bestowed on me; I shall not die until the moment I am ready for death.*" And he had died as a sannyasin who throws away the last thing he possesses, his broken body.

Hearing voices, she laid the head back on its pillow of flowers. A few of the monks came into the room, and one of them told how the last day had passed. Well before dawn the Swami had gone into the chapel with the monks, as he insisted upon doing in spite of his illness. They had grouped themselves around him and had remained spellbound, not even telling their beads, in amazement over the intensity of his meditation. Many thought they saw a halo of light upon him; he was as

beautiful in his deep *samadhi extasis*, they said, as Shiva the God. Did his half-closed eyes behold the world as in a vision? The monks continued speechless, murmuring only, "Om, Om!" In the power of the melodious worship that was sustaining him, Swami Vivekananda suddenly began his favorite hymn: "O Kali, my dark-featured Mother, illumine the lotus of my heart!"

Nivedita recognized the voice of Swami Brahmananda speaking: "For several days Swamiji had had a look of unflinching compassion on his face. I dared not look at him any longer, so like Sri Ramakrishna had he become."

Suddenly there was movement in the room. Nivedita realized that the funeral rites were about to begin. She got up. Prayers rose like a flight of white-winged birds. The time had come to break the chain which tied the boat to the shore, and watch it drifting into the ocean of light. "O God, why must we renounce him so that he can give himself to others?" Nivedita asked within herself, for the hundredth time.

Outside, where the Swami's body was now laid upon a couch, a dense crowd had gathered. How young he seemed, this builder of souls, who slept there, his face uncovered! Not yet forty! The monks had all shaved their heads. Now they stood motionless, with folded arms.

The farewell ceremony was short. A monk took the imprint of the Swami's feet with red *alta* on muslin. Lights were swung, mantras recited; camphor and incense were burned. The only sobbing came from the conches that were blown. Some of the monks bowed, others prostrated themselves three times on the ground; others went and laid their foreheads on the feet of their dead leader.

Then the procession formed. As the monks passed, carrying the body on their shoulders, a shout of grief and triumph rose from the crowd: "*Jaya Guru Maharaji ki jay!* Glory to Sri Ramakrishna!" It echoed and re-echoed before it died into a whisper from those who wept for their guide.

The bearers halted under the huge *bilva* tree at the monastery's western corner. A little lower down, a funeral pyre had been set up by the Ganges at the spot indicated by Swami Vive-

kananda himself. Reed torches were set alight there, and with them first Nivedita and then the monks made the offering of fire to the pyre.

Nivedita sat down under a tree a little distance away. Twice she joined in the shout of victory in death, "*Jaya, Jaya!*" But as the flames burst forth on every side of the funeral pyre the sense of death came over her overwhelmingly, and she hid her face in the folds of her dress. "O Swami," she prayed, "make the acts of my life conform always to your inmost will, and not to mine! Shiva, Shival!"

She stayed there until very late. A breeze had sprung up. There were ashes floating in the air. A piece of yellow cloth half-burnt fell into her lap as she sat; it was a scorched fragment of Swami Vivekananda's robe. Slowly the flames died down. Nivedita sat thinking of all her absent friends: Miss MacLeod, Mrs. Bull, Dr. Bose. She thought too of her own mother whose gentle hands alone could have soothed her deep grief.

Then the faithful Swami Sadananda approached her. How long had he been sitting close by? She had been glad to find this loyal and devoted soul when she had returned to India after her long absence; now it did her good to know that he was here beside her. She pulled herself together. "One must live so as to justify him," she said. "I only want to bear his burden. If I am allowed to drift away, I want to be faithful. . . ."

Prayers were rising, now, into the night. "The monks are worshipping," she said again, getting up, "but I haven't the time. Swamiji has entrusted me with a mission. I must work and watch."

As she walked away, she murmured, "Lord, Thy will be done!"

Some distance behind, Swami Sadananda followed her, weeping.





*Part Three*

*“Mother India”*



## 31. *A Political Mission*

NIVEDITA took up her life after Swami Vivekananda's death without hesitancy or apprehension. She knew that an immense task lay before her, and she was not afraid. Now as never before the true value of her guru's teaching was revealed to her. He had given her her freedom, and had made her a *karmayogini* [following the yoga of disinterested work], so that she could enter the lists in the armor of an unwavering faith. He had shown her the Unity that embraces the worker, his action, and the work itself, and the Energy that is impulse, movement, and repose. At this vital moment in her career she sharply analyzed the spiritual discipline that had been hers so far, and every step now appeared in its true perspective. Her guru had led her to cast off her personality, then to abandon herself in submission, and now, finally, to obtain complete mastery over herself. It had not been easy. When he loved most, he most upbraided. Now, alone and face to face with her responsibilities, she understood why Swami Vivekananda had taken such pains in preparing her. India, "Mother India," had become her *Ishta*, the supreme object of her devotion, in which she perceived the aim of her life and the peace of her acceptance.

Swami Vivekananda's life mission had been to establish a monastery which combined meditation with service. Hers was entirely different, and had several facets. It went far beyond her initial aim of working only for the women of India, although they were not to be left out of the larger purpose. She was to live, now, in and for the grand design of which her guru had

dreamed: an India in which the masses—the ignorant, the poor, the illiterate, the cobbler, the sweeper—were to be the flesh and blood of “Mother India.”

She had already asked herself the questions and looked ahead to the trials. She foresaw the difficulties that were to arise with the senior cenobites of Belur and her brother monks; Swami Vivekananda had warned her of these immediately after his own return to India. But she allowed nothing, small or large, to give her pause. If she no longer had her guru, she could drink from the fountain at which he had drunk, and let herself be carried away by the current of the life divine. From the ideals and principles which he had given her she moved on into action, but she would not blame him for any future consequences. She took her part boldly in India's struggle to find its soul, and she gave all she had without wondering what would become of her.

Those first years of the twentieth century were for India—as S. K. Ratcliffe was to write a decade later—a time of “exceptional deadness in public life,” but nevertheless the seeds of a new life could be felt germinating everywhere. “The people as yet are like men in dreams,” Nivedita had summed up her own impression soon after her return. “They are not awake; they do not know to what end their dormant power may be diverted. The soil and all that grows upon the soil—are these not things to make men strong?” Beneath this external apathy a clandestine movement, aimed at undermining the “enemy occupation,” was beginning to form and to establish a network in which Nivedita was to find her place, amid other heroic sacrifices that were often still incoherent. Such a movement, not yet clearly defined, was seeking its leaders.

In this nascent movement Nivedita played the required part of being a useful link between intellectuals. The outbursts of enthusiasm and the murmurs of the malcontents emerging from their former apathy were all, for her, so many efforts to be canalized and directed before they became positive. But always, at a given moment, she withdrew, to let the workers act freely and accomplish, alone, something which would be unique and their own contribution. She filled to perfection the role of an

instrument. Among the elite, like the swift water that dashes on the mill wheel with no care for the grain that is crushed, she was the motive force that simply works, indifferent to the pleasures and sorrows of the miller. Only the end counted. On a lower plane, in the midst of the masses, she found herself in the presence of contradictory forces—greatness and pettiness, bravery and cowardice—and here her attitude had to be different. Her first task was to fashion the characters of the people who worked with her, and give them back the desire for self-sacrifice which they had lost through subjugation.

Thus Nivedita, like her guru, knew solitude: a stern sannyasa in which nothing was personal—neither her work nor the power which radiated from her. But in her detachment she had kept a natural tenderness which lightened the burdens and griefs of those who confided in her. She drew from the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna an intensely human love which brought happiness to those about her, though she did not stop with that. "If Swamiji had done nothing but transmit love, he would still be living and could teach under a mango tree," she said. "But he has given me this power so that I can do this work, so that I can struggle as he struggled. May it devour me as it devoured him!"

In her worst difficulties she kept her mind fixed on the ultimate Will. "Are you going to tell me that my India, in which I believe, does not exist?" she would demand of those who showed anxiety. "The captain of a ship is always thinking of his port of destination, even when he is not on the bridge. The port I am making for is the fulfillment of India's destiny. That is the course on which my compass is set night and day.

She made also this point clear in her public speeches: "I am here to teach you to become men! Live your epics today! The *Ramayana* is not something that came once and for all, from a society that is dead and gone. Make your own *Ramayana*, not in written stories but in service and achievement for the Motherland!"

She always took care not to set herself up as a religious teacher. "The poorest of the poor knows more about it than I

do," she declared, when pressed to speak of her faith. But she loved indiscriminately, like a mother.

"She was a mother of the people," Rabindranath Tagore was to say of her after her death. "While we were giving our time, our money, even our life, we had not yet been able to give our heart. We had not acquired the power to know the people as absolutely real and near."

But for Nivedita every Hindu was a brother, and, more than that, a son of Mother India. When many took her for their guru in politics, she raised no objections. It mattered little to her. In the midst of the enthusiasm she evoked, such a relationship was inevitable. She took advantage of it to make herself the apostle of an expression which was much to the fore, the "*Dharma*," a word that cannot be translated into any Western language. "Dharma is the substance, the selfness, of things and of men," she said, and fell back for further exposition on the words of Swami Vivekananda:

"Man, impelled by the force of life, believes in his religion, his family, the class which sustains him, the village which maintains him, and the country which he honors. He is ready to give his life for any of these. He lives for an ideal, and his thirst ever carries him on, to the point where he can conceive of the Unity in diversity. This effort, this accent of life with all its force and energy, is the Dharma which epitomizes the dream of India as a whole."

Nivedita had questioned her guru long and earnestly on this point—a fact which explained the similarity between the views of Swami Vivekananda the patriot, and her own teaching. "The new state of things must be a growth from within," he had said. Conscious of the fundamental contradictions, both in conception and in aim, between the nationalistic ideas of Western countries and the traditional society of India, Nivedita during this period of transition used the idea of "strength," as derived from the *Upanishads*, to give to the word Dharma a wider interpretation based on centuries-old ideals.

"Dharma is for us," she explained, "what civilization is for the West. It is a goal, an effort to maintain the supremacy of

spiritual values. Such is the function of a self-reliant religion. Never lose sight of the fact that India rests on that foundation! God is the heart of that person who, going beyond his individual experience, realizes his entire solidarity with others, transposes his personal law, and projects it upon the entire group. That is Dharma."

The idea of Dharma incorporated in practical sociology was well received, and frequently discussed, with Nivedita's active encouragement. By way of analogy, she often used the metaphor of the passive power of Shiva's body, from which Kali's tumultuous movement sprang. "The man who enters wholeheartedly into collective Dharma plays the same part," she said. "His effective power is great. For that reason he must submit himself to a personal discipline that is all the more exacting." Continuing her use of religious symbols, she would repeat that Dharma was forcefully pointed to in the last verse of the *Gita* as the way traced out for the Hindu nation: "Where there is Krishna, the master of Yoga, and where there is Partha, the archer, there indeed are glory, victory, prosperity, and the immutable law of justice."

With her extremely human, and novel, way of transition from esoteric concept to direct social significance and instigation, Nivedita would show how, in this lofty interpretation, Dharma contained within itself the whole symbol of the "nation" which was yet so new to conceive. It was difficult to give weight to this idea. There was at first the vague aspiration toward moving on from the living practical religion which Swami Vivekananda had taught to the full concept of the "nation"; this took shape gradually, and at last was clearly established. The inherent ideal suddenly burst out of the narrow mold of the family and embraced the group, the village, the town. The particular aim was transformed into a collective ideal. "Dharma" had become synonymous with "Indian nation."

India a nation! What a dazzling thought! Was it capable of the sacrifices that would be necessary to maintain its life, to express itself, to gain its freedom? "Mother India" soon appeared to be the divine Energy—Shakti—clothed in the foam of



the sea, the red dust of Malabar, the mud of the Ganges, the sands of the Punjab, the snows of Kashmir. To bewitch men, She let Herself be worshiped according to all the rites, and in all the temples. "Instead of being the slaves of an unknowable Brahman let us be Her slaves," cried Nivedita. "In place of altars, build factories and universities. Instead of bringing offerings, take care of the people, and educate them. Instead of giving ourselves up to passive adoration, let us struggle to acquire knowledge, and to establish co-operation and organization. Our orthodoxy should express itself in the civic life. All that exists is That One, though savants may call it what name they will!"

Although Nivedita's determination towards action had been consummated some time before, her active interest in India's political life had really begun during the meeting of the National Congress in Calcutta in December, 1901, just after her return from the West. It took specific shape a few weeks later, when Kakuso Okakura and her old friend Surendranath Tagore came together at the house of Mrs. Bull, who had just arrived in Calcutta. The two men were working jointly with their friends to establish chains of secret societies—to arouse the Hindus' political sense—in the Northern Provinces. The attempts were premature and failed, but Nivedita found the work astonishingly similar to what she herself had been doing seven years before, among the Irish in England. Okakura soon departed on a Buddhist pilgrimage across India. Before he returned to Calcutta Nivedita had already been marked down by the British police for her allegedly subversive activities.

The first warning that the police had begun to open her mail dated from the beginning of March, 1902. She laughed at this—the attack was normal—but there was no doubt that she was writing many letters to the political leaders she had met during the Congress meetings which clearly showed her pre-occupations. One man who immediately became her friend was Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a calm, austere man who, though only Nivedita's age, had taught political economy at Poona for twenty years. They disagreed—he was too moderate and even-

tempered to suit her—but she appreciated his nobility of character and set great store by his friendship even when she was trying to bring him to her more extreme approach.

It is an obvious fact to me that our differences of opinion are merely such [she wrote] that I could more easily imagine myself retreating before the last ordeal than *your* courage failing us in anything that you saw to be right. For, after all, I am only a woman, while I rejoice to think that yours is every inch the strength and persistency of a man!

But I wish I could infect you with my view of the whole thing. Instead of sadness you would then be filled with such an infinite joy! And you might just as well have it. There is a great festival of struggle and growing life before us. When one feels baffled and sad, it is because one has failed to find the true lines of action along which the fire leaps to the blaze. When one has found more, is there any time for sighing? Do not let us spend our effort longer trying to reform abuses: *let us make life!* Manhood and womanhood will find out for themselves what way to work; set life free! Accept all that comes of it! The instinct of a great people filled with divine austerity and the highest human passion will lead them very far from your thoughts to mine about them. So much the better.

I wish I could give you this gladness that fills me! I love the sorrow and the struggle and the divine self-sacrifice that may be ours!

If she had a special personal liking for Gokhale, her views were certainly more in accord with those of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the leader of the extremist party, publisher of the nationalist newspaper *Kesari*. But both men worked in perfect harmony with the friends Nivedita had discovered in Bengal. All, together, represented that hidden force which was to burst out a few years later.

During those first months of 1902, the seeds of all Nivedita's later life had really been sown under the eyes of Swami Vivekananda. He had placed entire confidence in her and had made it clear that he would never interfere in any path she chose

to take, though sometimes he appeared to be concerned as to whether she could combine this expression of active life with the spiritual discipline he had given her. Once when he was in Calcutta he had reproved her sharply in the presence of several of his disciples. She had not arrived, on her daily visit to him, by eight o'clock that evening, and the Swami was beginning to be anxious when she came in.

"Nivedita, you should above all remember that you are a Brahmacharini," he said, sternly. "You should not go outside after dark for any reason, not even to come here. What is the cause of your lateness?"

"I went out with Okakura on some business—we were delayed," she answered. Conversation was resumed, but only after Nivedita had bowed in obedience to her guru.

On the other hand, Swami Vivekananda had very often remarked, to these groups of disciples and friends during the last months, that he counted on Nivedita to arouse the political sense among Hindus. He wanted patriotism in India, love for the country. It was in that sense that he had pledged her to serve India, and to sacrifice herself to the last renunciation.

"I see that the independence of India will come in some unthinkable way," he used to say, "but if you cannot make yourself worthy of it, it will not live over three generations. India cannot be Japan or Russia. She must stand on her own ideal. She will have to build up a government that includes members of all castes, with no superiority complex between them. If the boundaries of caste disappear, the qualities of castes must remain. In a well-organized state, scholars, fighters, merchants, and laborers must be equally respected. Your first work is to educate the masses."

It was only to be expected that Nivedita, having taken such a clearly defined stand, should find herself in serious difficulties, after Swami Vivekananda's death, with the Belur monastery. The direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who had been entrusted with the propagation of the monastic and spiritual ideal of their institution, associated with the concept of humanitarian

service, showed considerable concern over her political activities.

For her part, although she wished to collaborate with the Ramakrishna Mission through her work for the women of India, she felt nonetheless that she had a definite political mission as well. The divergence of opinion was complete. She had a cruel but short struggle within herself, because she felt bound by the promise she had made to her guru never to compromise the monastery by any of her activities, and she wanted to keep her word rigorously.

To the monks, Swami Vivekananda had said that Nivedita must be given full liberty, "even if she works without any connection with the Mission"; but they now realized that she might deflect their line of conduct. They appealed to her vow of obedience either to renounce entirely the activity which was so dear to her, or so to organize her life that her freedom would be wholly recognized. Was not her educational mission, to which she had hardly put her hand since her return, activity enough? She listened to the proposal, and replied categorically to Swami Brahmananda:

"I cannot do otherwise than this. I have identified myself with the idea of Mother India, I have become the idea itself, and I could die more easily than submit."

Swami Brahmananda loved Nivedita deeply, though he disapproved of her attitude. One day she called upon him unexpectedly to discuss the delicate situation. But the conversation turned into a meditation. After half an hour, when Swami Brahmananda opened his eyes, she was still motionless, devoid of thought, lost in the void.

It was this great spiritual unity between them that inspired the supple, yet rigorous, arrangement to which Nivedita submitted in the following letter:

17, Bose Para Lane,  
Bagh Bazar,  
Calcutta,  
July 18th, 1902

Dear Swami Brahmananda,

Will you accept on behalf of the Order and myself my

acknowledgement of your letter this morning. Painful as is the occasion I can but acquiesce in any measures that are necessary to my complete freedom.

I trust however that you and other members of the Order will not fail to lay my love and reverence daily at the feet of the ashes of Sri Ramakrishna and my own beloved Guru.

I shall write to the Indian Papers and acquaint them as quietly as possible with my changed position.

Yours in all gratitude and good faith,

NIVEDITA OF RAMAKRISHNA-VIVEKANANDA

The signature of this letter had been discussed at great length. It did not engage the responsibility of the monastery and kept Nivedita spiritually allied to her brother monks.

Among the big Calcutta dailies, *Patrika* was the first to publish the news item which appeared next day under the heading, SISTER NIVEDITA:

We have been requested to inform the public that at the conclusion of the days of mourning for the Swami Vivekananda, it has been decided between the members of the Order at Belur Math and Sister Nivedita that her work shall henceforth be regarded as free and entirely independent of their sanction of authority.

There remained the practical question of accounts, which was soon settled. Of the sums at her disposal, Nivedita handed over to the Math four hundred pounds, to buy a house for Sarada Devi. She kept for herself only the annual current grant for the upkeep of her house at Bagh Bazar, and a sum for travel expenses on a projected lecture tour. Swami Sadananda remained with her, together with one of the Order's most distinguished novices, Amulyer Maharaj. Her life of independence had an excellent beginning!

To Miss MacLeod, however, she confided her sorrow at seeing the problem of Indian women set against her political mission, confessing both her thought and her stabblings of uncertainty. A few weeks after Swami Vivekananda's death she wrote:

The great stream of the Oriental woman's life flows on.

Who am I that I should seek in any way to change it? Suppose even that I could add my impress to ten or twelve girls, would it be so much gain? Is it not rather by taking the *national* consciousness of the women, like that of the men, and setting it toward greater problems and responsibilities, that one can help? Then, when they have surveyed the *great* scheme, have they not already become open to new views of life and necessity? Will they not achieve these for themselves? O Yum, I don't know! This may all be my own sophistry. I cannot tell. Only I think my task is to awake a nation, not to influence a few women. A man has come and shown me how—but this is only giving edge to my sword. Already I saw these things. . . .

As to my task, I may not succeed. You do not realize as I do, you cannot, the hopelessness of the task and my own inadequacy. But ought this to make any difference? I *see*—therefore ought I not to act? Must we not throw ourselves now into the great ocean of Mother and leave it to Her whether we come to land or not?

Why was the Guru withdrawn just then? Was it not that each atom might work out unhindered without torture to him—the great destiny that his life flowing through might bring it? Do you not remember how he said, “When a great man has prepared his workers, he must go to another place, for he cannot make them free in his own presence!”

But Nivedita was full of confidence, and she added, “I know you will always shadow and bless the work done in his name. . . .”

## 32. *Spreading the Swami's Message*

NIVEDITA'S WORK was very far from being political. As the spiritually adopted daughter of Swami Vivekananda, she held a position of honor, of question (had he let his mantle fall upon her shoulder?), and of appointed labor. She was invited to talk about her guru. Other invitations came to her from Lahore, Bombay, Poona.

Meanwhile, the many obituary notices in the various Indian newspapers gave some idea of the importance of the movement for spiritual co-operation which Swami Vivekananda had launched in the heart of orthodox India. They contained pen-portraits, enthusiastic analyses, and also some bitter criticism. He was described as a religious and social reformer, an apostle of neo-Hinduism who had revived the sannyasa of Buddha and Shankara, an ambassador between India and the West. One writer recalled the traditional story of Kabir, whose body, at his death, was demanded by both Hindus and Moslems, and remarked, "A similar fate seems to await the memory of Swami Vivekananda." He had exalted the divinities of Hindus, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jews, Christians. But however opinions of his work might differ, there was universal recognition of his central purpose: to establish the greatness of the Vedanta philosophy and to endow it with a practical meaning.

In her first public talk two weeks after the Swami's death, Nivedita appeared at Jessore (a town in East Bengal) in the yellow robe of a fully ordained swami. She spoke with deep

emotion and great simplicity, but refused to deal with topics of religion. "Swami Vivekananda shall be the whole of my religion and my patriotism," she said. During the three days of her stay, she was in close contact with schoolchildren and their parents, and also with the young men of the district belonging to Kakuso Okakura's group. She had already worked with Kakuso Okakura in an editorial capacity, six months before, in the rewriting and replanning of his book, *The Ideals of the East*, as well as his travel notes.

By the third week in September, taking Swami Sadananda with her, she started on her speaking tour to the north of India. A letter to Miss MacLeod at this time reveals a mood of apprehension that was unusual with her, and also the closeness of her spirit to any word that could be recalled from Swami Vivekananda:

I was precipitated upon the task somewhat more suddenly than we expected, as you see. . . . When I wrote to you I needed help. But life itself took me in hand. It is good to hear the words you tell (about myself) from the guru: "India shall ring with her." I came out on this journey with "Margot's boldness" ringing in my heart. Is that the plan Swamiji is now beginning to fulfill? I begin now to understand a little of the development of his own mind regarding it.

Bombay, at the beginning of her trip, brought Nivedita for the first time into contact with a public that was not Bengali. In this prosperous city she immediately sensed a subdued hostility to be overcome, particularly among the wealthy "westernized" Hindus who had become accustomed to turning their eyes toward Europe. Her first lecture here was on "The National Significance of Swami Vivekananda's Life and Work." When it was over she said, "Dare I say now that Bombay is his? At least they tell me so!" The gist of her message was as follows:

"Swami Vivekananda was at once the expression of super-conscious religion and one of the greatest patriots ever born. He lived at a moment of national disintegration, and he was



fearless of the new. He lived when men were abandoning their heritage, and he was an ardent worshiper of the old. In him the national destiny fulfilled itself. . . . His whole life was a search for the common basis of Hinduism. Because he believed in its organic unity, he found, with unexpected particulars and paradoxes, the key to Indian unity in its exclusiveness.

"What then was the prophecy that Swami Vivekananda left to his own people, he who never dreamed of failure? Here was a man who spoke of naught but strength. To him, his country's hope is in herself. Never in the alien. The India of his dreams was in the future; the new phase of consciousness initiated today through pain and suffering was to be but the first step in a long evolution. It is in her *own* life—not in imitation—that India will find life, from her proper past and environment. Vivekananda had but one word, one constantly reiterated message! 'Awake! Arise! Struggle on, and not until the goal is reached!'"

In addition to her lecture on Swami Vivekananda, Nivedita spoke on "The Hindu Mind in Modern Science," "The Unity of India," "The Problem of the Assimilation of the English Language," "Indian Womanhood," "Asiatic Modes," and other subjects. She addressed various social groups in Bombay, and spoke in several theaters. Her lectures were reported at length in the newspapers, and there was no question but that she had won her public. Students would come and ask her, "How can we make ourselves useful?" And she would reply, "Serve India in one way or another! Set yourselves free, like me!"

During the six weeks of her tour she made lengthy stays in a number of towns, establishing contact everywhere with the groups that supported her guru. She went as far north as Lahore, but spent most of her time in Surat, Baroda, and Ahmedabad. Then she went on to Wardha and Nagpur, where in the deportations she saw for the first time at first hand the consequences of the open struggle against Britain. And in Baroda she made the acquaintance of Aurobindo Ghose who, in fact, met her at the railroad station as representative of the Gaekwar of Baroda and drove her to the State guesthouse.

Aurobindo Ghose was then thirty years old.\* He had apparently no important part in politics to play at that time, but lived a life of semiseclusion, occupied with study when he was not engaged with his duties as a professor in Baroda College. During the nine years since his return from England he had been assimilating Asiatic culture with the same enthusiasm with which, at Cambridge University, he had mastered that of the West. He and Nivedita were already known to one another through their writing, as well as through their bond in their love of India and of freedom. To Aurobindo Ghose, Nivedita was the author of *Kali, the Mother*. To her, he was the leader of the future, whose fiery articles in the *Indu Prakash*—one of Bombay's large newspapers—had sounded opening guns in the coming struggle, four years before.

Now he was giving meticulous individual training to the members of a party which was to have important work to do later on, when the time came to canalize revolutionary aspirations into a single concerted action. His plan was widely conceived, and was gradually implemented as he enlisted the necessary men to form a network through towns and villages from Baroda to Bengal. But Nivedita was impatient.

"Calcutta needs you," she told him. "Your place is in Bengal."

"Not yet," he answered. "I am working behind the lines. But the advance posts must be manned."

"You can count on me," Nivedita said, stretching out her hand. "I am your ally."

She brought him all she possessed, with her Irish blood, to be fitted into the prepared plan.

In Baroda she gave lectures, went sightseeing, and paid several visits to the palace of the Gaekwar. But many evening hours were spent in heated discussions with Aurobindo Ghose or

\* Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950). After the great part he played in the politics of Bengal (1900-1911) he retired in Pondicherry to form the Ashram bearing his name. He has given a striking philosophy applying for the first time the theory of evolution to the Vedantic doctrines with a vision of supramentalized life. He is considered as one of the greatest seers of the modern age.

with Romesh Chunder Dutt, whom she was delighted to see again in Baroda.

When she returned to Calcutta she found an invitation from Madras awaiting her. She set off three weeks later, stopping only a few days en route at Bhuvaneshvar, the holy town of Shiva, where according to tradition, seven thousand temples repeat the same incantation, "*Om Namah Shivaya*, I prostrate myself before Shiva!" She had taken several friends with her to share these few days of holiday and discovery. She climbed to the top of Udayagari Hill where monolithic temples dug out of the rock told the history of India. She walked out into the country to visit those lands of the south which her guru had loved so deeply. She went inside the village houses, into the poorest hovels, and said, "Here I am in the heart of my India." What days of serenity and repose and contemplation spent in the outpourings of an extravagant faith! All around her the temples prayed, all with the same fervor, whether they were shapeless masses of pebbles raised by pilgrims or domes bristling with grinning gargoyles. In the evening, cymbals, drums, and conches beat out heavy, throbbing rhythms that struck deep into the soul.

At Madras, Nivedita was awaited with mixed feelings by the personal friends of Swami Vivekananda. Some of them were afraid of her, because of her independence and her influence. Others admired her for her courage. All, alike, were eager to question her about the last months of the Swami's life.

She stayed several weeks in Madras, and here, too, her success was widespread and moving. She spoke often, in the Ramakrishna Mission and in different halls in the city. With touching simplicity, she created around her an atmosphere of isolation, reserved for the spirit of her guru. She became a living link between contemplation and action. The words of passionate renunciation took on a double meaning on her lips: for the elders they were an incantation; for the young men they rang out like a call to arms. Two generations rose to bless her. There were no more doubts or arguments.

"Either the unity of India exists today or there will never

be unity among us," she said in her lectures, "The Unity of India," and added: "Do not allow people to tell you that the unity does not exist; do not allow a false patriotism that declares we are weak, we are divided, miserable, helpless and bound. New life, strong life, must be forever finding new expression. If this life of ours be true, we shall be realizing new truths all the time. Let us express it in strength, whatever form the truth may take!"

She went south as far as Salem, where she inaugurated the first Hall dedicated to Swami Vivekananda, and also visited several members of the Congress; then she continued her journey toward Trichinopoli. This was an incursion into Brahman and Dravidian India, and it moved her deeply.

"If the North is the intellect, the heart of the continent," one of her friends quoted her as saying, "the South appears as a colossal statue of stone, seated in majestic repose, looking with deep inscrutable eyes from sea to sea. Swami Vivekananda felt that his mission had become Indian only when he was accepted by Madras. So, too, in days afar off, Buddhism and Vaishnavism started from the North, and became national and enduring only after the South had tested them and set her seal on them." It was this same approval that Nivedita had come to seek from the South, in the service of Mother India.

For herself, moreover, she found inspiration in every new impression. She was never tired of watching the women of the South, with their flowing gait, their uncovered faces, their hair hanging down their backs, their jewels that jangled as they passed her. All their saris were of vivid colors. The men, with their naked chests daubed with sandal paste or ashes and marked with carmine, proudly displayed all the signs of their castes. Life had thrown aside all its veils and was bursting with exuberance.

The temple of Chidambaram offered her another great experience, as she realized the similarity between the Hindu temples and the medieval Christian abbeys as they had been described to her. She spent a whole day in the temple gardens, behind the high pyramid-shaped doors on which, ranged in seven tiers,

there is depicted a fantastic dance that shows gods wearing miters, goddesses crowned with flowers, and all their army of attendants, potbellied gnomes, and monsters with eyes like *loto* balls. On the inner side the garden walls were lined with straw sheds, where the priests lived with the wandering monks and the pilgrims. Brahman children were learning the Sanskrit *Shastras*, and writing on palm leaves. Under broad parasols of plaited straw, vendors of fruit, flowers, and sweetmeats were selling offerings to the gods. Widows with shaven heads were tapping their blown cheeks and shouting prayers. "Hara, Hara, Hara!"\* they cried. The air was redolent of flowers, incense, and burnt oil. "It is here that civic life must be grafted," Nivedita said to her friends. "The life of the temple must overflow into the life of the world. The movement must start from the temples and return, after a long journey, to the shrine of the Divine Mother Herself."

The one thing that threw a cloud over the last days of the journey was Swami Sadananda's ill-health. Throughout the trip the monk had been a tower of never-failing strength to Nivedita. "If any one thing has contributed more than another to any success I have had," she had written in October, "it has been Swami Sadananda. First, giving me freedom; second, transferring his bodyguard to me, just as he gave it to Swamiji. . . . Can you not realize the strength it is to have the company of a sadhu, Swami's disciple and my own brother, wherever I go?" Whenever she spoke, she added in the same letter, she would glance from time to time toward the monk sitting beside her. "I feel as if some wild king of the woods had allowed itself to be tamed and chained, in too great a generosity even to know the sacrifice it was making."

Now, as Christmas found them still at Madras, Swami Sadananda was far from well. But it had been his suggestion that the Holy Night should be celebrated in the Khanda Giri country, at the foot of hills that were covered with whispering trees. They lighted a fire in the open air and sat around it with local villagers, who had brought sandalwood and incense. Swami

\* One of Shiva's names.

Sadananda and Amalyer Maharaj had dressed themselves as Chaldean shepherds, making their blankets into cloaks. Nivedita read aloud the story of the birth of Jesus, of the Magi who came from the East, of Mary who "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart," and the monk translated, word for word, for the village people. One of the men bowed his face to the earth and shouted, "Glory to Christ! Jesus is our path, too! Peace on earth! Glory to the divine Child!" The harmony of the night embraced all these simple and fervent worshipers, who saw and heard the angels of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart. . . ."

It was early January, in 1903, when Nivedita returned to Calcutta. Urgent tasks were awaiting her there.

### 33. *The New Life*

IN HER home at Bagh Bazar Nivedita plunged at once into political activity. She also had personal relations to establish, and personal problems to solve. One of the most pressing of the latter concerned her friendship with Jagadis Bose.

When she left him in England, living in the atmosphere of security with which Mrs. Bull's thoughtfulness surrounded him and engrossed by the creative passion of the scientist, he had been vexed and irritated by her response to the call of India rather than the need for co-operation in his work. His attitude had been, "So you prefer India to my success!" He had not written to her again.

Now he himself was about to return to India. Throughout her northern journey Nivedita had often worried about him. Although he was some years older than she was, she felt toward him as toward a spiritual son. There was real significance in her calling him "the Bairn" in spite of her respect for his scientific achievement. "I quite understand that my first duty for the next few months will probably be my Bairn," she wrote to Miss MacLeod in September; and she was quite prepared to grant him a large place in her active existence. But she did not reckon, at first, with a not unnatural self-centeredness.

At Bombay she stayed over a day to wait for his ship, which had been delayed by bad weather; but in vain. She did not see him. Then she arranged to be at Nagpur when, as she expected, his train would come through, so that they might have a quarter-hour of talk, at least. But he purposely chose a train

that went to Calcutta by another route. Nivedita wept over the hostility and secret suffering of her "son," and wrote to Miss MacLeod:

It is curious that we seem to be divided now. . . . My little Bairn is divine, but where the country is concerned, I am the guru. . . . My heart is not changed because my view of life is larger and truer today. The real thing is there, just as it always was. But that is an impersonal thing, not limited by names.

This was the frame of mind in which she waited for Dr. Bose in Calcutta. But when he came to see her, on a morning in November, he was hard and cold and ill-humored. When he discovered how generously she had waited for him, while he had been avoiding her, his ill-humor was increased by his fierce shame. They talked about the difficulties that sprang from his possessive egoism and her devotion to India, but they seemed to reach no possibility of clear agreement. "It is true that I have served you, my Bairn," Nivedita said. "Consider all that has been necessary to save life and brain, and too, perhaps, to exhaust my karma. Only, it was like Sri Ramakrishna's worship of Christ, or Mohammed, or woman. Having once done it, he left it. So, having realized that, I am not to limit myself by it. I am to pass on. I am a nun, not anything else. The past must not define the present. . . ."

Suddenly, in spite of himself, Bose felt the shell of his resistance pierced, his spirit penetrated, by that impersonal love of Nivedita's. And he heard himself stammering fervid, eager words: "I, too, yes, I, too, want to serve India." He left her radiant, full of the old warm affection: he had grasped the ideal for which Nivedita stood.

During the interval between Nivedita's two journeys they saw a great deal of each other. But this despotic friendship, to which she still clung, showed her how necessary it was for her to begin her independent life, and to build tight walls between her friends, even, to preserve them from one another. She must reinforce, around herself, that silence which would make it pos-



sible for her to act in complete liberty. Her left hand must ignore what her right hand was doing. Soon she was to write:

I cannot call anyone my co-operator: they are all my children. A year ago I was a child. Now I am a mother. . . . It is all one life, no distinction anywhere. . . . Lately I have made a disciple, and he wished to become a *Brahmacharin* [taking a vow of consecration]. Sitting out under the stars, he asked me what he should do about his young wife, and it was easy to tell him. I have become free . . . I must aim to meet the needs of each one—as Swamiji did; and I know he helps me.

When she took her present house at Bagh Bazar she sent to England for her family's faithful servant Bet, and with her help she adorned her simple home with a calm and restful order. The walls were plastered with dried earth, the windows had no panes, the blinds were of dried straw, the strip of ground stretching to the street corner—which she hoped one day to make a flower garden—was only a wasteland. But while she thanked God for these simple surroundings—knowing luxury to be the soul's winding sheet—she had built around herself an atmosphere of strength and confidence, and had given her home a very real beauty. She and Bet had added a little white-wash to the walls and had planted a few ferns and hardy flowers close to the house. In the courtyard—paved in red brick and kept exquisitely clean—there was a seat in the shade of the gnarled fig tree. As soon as one came through the door one felt at home, sheltered, far removed from the world. A sense of coolness made one forget the crowded tumbledown streets and the glare of the blinding sun. All that might have been austere or even sordid had been transformed into a joyous serenity.

Several faithful souls who had known Sri Ramakrishna lived nearby in Bagh Bazar. And Nivedita knew every house in the district. Yet of all that she had built up in this same locality three years before, there remained absolutely nothing. "Everything on which I lean gives way, except Sadananda and Bet," she wrote in a letter. "I see that the first lesson is to depend on none, to throw away one's love and service and ask for nothing."

But the people smiled on her. She was poor among the poor, herself living on charity. . . .

She had, however, her "accredited" beggars. There were three of these to begin with, and she gave each of them eight annas a week. She made a new heading in her budget, therefore: *Six rupees for my Brothers who teach me confidence in God. . . .*" In fact, each of the beggars brought her his form of surrender, and her love for India became fruitful and multiplied in her heart because of them.

In every way possible she plunged into the conventional and orthodox India, seeing in it beauties which the Hindus themselves no longer saw. She admired the exquisitely natural forms of the everyday utensils and felt the thrill of the sacred music—seemingly so discordant to foreign ears—which reflects ancestral rhythms rather than tunes. She was aware of the ideal that is hidden behind every gesture. This was the India that she loved with all her soul.

For this very reason, she was accused of being reactionary. And she *was* reactionary, as she frankly admitted, without being concerned over the apparent inconsistency between this attitude and her desire to create, among her friends, an atmosphere of unrest and rebellion against England. In this, she showed true feminine obstinacy, with a perfect loyalty that was willing to face the consequences of all her advanced theories.\*

In a letter in this autumn of 1902, she wrote: "My point is India's good. I feel as if, in these days, neither love nor religion were mine; for if I could I would turn every Hindu into an eater of meat. I begin to understand wealth and desire, and yet I dare not say it is irreligious, either. . . . I myself seem utterly detached from austerities. I understand, now, Swami's three rooms in European style, his food, and many other things."

Life in its diversity was revolving rapidly about her now. Toward the end of this year that was so crucial for her (in late November, 1902), she wrote to Miss MacLeod: "A young man came to me whose one idea is to make Swamiji's name the rally-

\* See the article by A. J. F. Blair, "Sister Nivedita," in *The Bengali*, October, 1911.

ing point for 'Young India.' He is wild about him, and he is such a strong fine man himself. He is independent, and a Brahman. You do not know, Yum, how that great triumphal Resurrection is going to prove the beginning of Swami's work and name, in a very real sense. It was necessary, darling, that you should give him up, in order that others might gain him. As for me, that anguish in Brittany has made me strong now. To me he is not gone."

This was when she was living—poor among the poor—in the mud-plastered house in Bagh Bazar, and there taking part in political activity for the freedom of India. Many tides of life swept around and through her. Yet the power-giving benediction of Swami Vivekananda, which she felt so strongly within her, was her complete security. Whenever she was in difficulty she clung to it, remembering how Sannyasa had been given to her.

"Everything seems a failure," she wrote at this same time, "save that great life of the guru, and its completeness of victory. Ah, the room of the great Blessing is down at the Inn [the lodge at Ridgely Manor]! I find myself so often sitting by the fire in your Hall, as the shadows fall, while he talks on and on, and afternoon grows to evening."

But the waves of emotion that she had floated upon, so far, yielded gradually to a doctrine that was not without severity.

She needed, at this time, a stabilizing element in her life. And she was to find it in a woman she had already met as one of Swami Vivekananda's disciples, Christine Greenstid, an American of German parentage. Life had not been easy for Christine. She had met Swami Vivekananda in Chicago in 1894, and had wished to follow him; but she had been obliged to toil for seven years, to provide for her widowed mother and five sisters, before she could leave for India. Three months after she arrived, her guru died. . . .

Swami Vivekananda had expected much from Christine, because of her natural disposition was close to that of the Hindu woman. "I worry about everything except you," he had written to her. "I have dedicated you to the Mother." She had an

exceptional gift of patience, which Nivedita had seen at work in Mayavati during the Swami's illness. "She sits so quietly, and is so true to him. And yet she is always a link and never a discord. And oh, so true! She is as staunch as a MacLeod," Nivedita added, not without a touch of mischief, in her letter to her confidante, Yum. "She is gentle and clinging, and," she continued, "not so dominant as you—perfect in trustworthiness, and so large in her views."

This was the woman with whom Nivedita was now to establish an indissoluble friendship, whose qualities were what she needed in order that her own life and future work might be built on a solid foundation, and yet whom she must now first comfort in her personal grief. While Nivedita had responded immediately to the call for action, after Swami Vivekananda's death, Christine had remained at Mayavati in the Himalayas to meditate. It was Nivedita's strong will that persuaded her to return to the plains. The two women were absolutely different from one another, but in that very difference their friendship found its mutual need and its strength. Christine became the quiet background in Nivedita's life, the warmth of the home, the steady and friendly hand that held the rudder, while Nivedita herself swept along like some great stormy wind bringing life to everything it touched. . . .

## 34. *Young India*

FIVE YEARS after Margaret Noble's arrival in India—a disciple of Swami Vivekananda with no thought beyond helping him in his religious and educational work, a British stranger with no knowledge of the alien land to which she had come—Nivedita was now filling an appointed place within the Indian Nationalist Organization which had its headquarters in Bengal. Aurobindo Ghose, in spite of his absence, was the organization's chief leader. Nivedita's work of propaganda was done largely, at this time, through the medium of her "Sunday breakfasts," and in her contacts with the students of the actively revolutionary "Dawn Society."

The breakfasts actually began in November, 1902, when she described her northern tour to her friends, and by the end of the first year they were serving in the capacity of a secret rendezvous between nationalists. "We keep more or less open house," she wrote in a letter at the outset. "We are extravagant in brown bread and Quaker oats." With Nivedita as their life and soul the breakfast gatherings discussed the events of the week, and also the newspapers. They organized assistance, when necessary, for the families of political exiles. They soon became, on several counts, an indispensable adjunct to the Nationalist Organization's work.

Nivedita entertained in her study on the upper floor of her house: a quiet room. On the walls were an ivory crucifix and a photograph of Swami Vivekananda. The table, piled with

notes, articles, and clippings, held also a bowl of flowers and a very rare statuette of the Buddha. Visitors sat on straw mats on the floor. Everyone would bring his friends; and, in spite of the increasing heat and the discomfort in returning home under the blazing midday sun, the groups, sheltered behind lowered straw blinds and sustained by many cups of coffee, did not break up until late in the morning.

The fact of being received by Nivedita soon became a veritable testimonial, and added greatly to the feeling of solidarity among the newcomers. Accepted by her they were welcomed and trusted whether they were emissaries from Poona with definite and advanced ideas, Bengalis, who always invested facts with more subtle contours, sometimes a monk of the Rama-krishna Mission, or English journalists like S. K. Ratcliffe, whom her friends jokingly called "Nivedita's *chela*." There were constant goings and comings between Baroda and Calcutta, too. And whether these Sunday visitors were members of the National Congress, leaders in public affairs, Civil Servants, men of letters, professors, or journalists, when they found themselves in Nivedita's house they set aside their respective caste barriers, to become nothing but "nationalists" in her sense of that word. "The test, the real test, of a leader lies in holding widely different people together along the lines of their common sympathies," Swami Vivekananda had taught her, "and this can only be done unconsciously: never by trying." It was this unification-in-variety that was the object of her preliminary work.

The meetings were permeated by an atmosphere of complete freedom, which was of necessity an atmosphere of quest and intellectual upheaval. These friends of Nivedita's belonged, every one of them, to perfectly autonomous and aristocratic groups which held an exclusive monopoly of their own knowledge and no correlation each with each. The Western education to which the country had been subject had disseminated unas-similable principles of European democracy and had resulted merely in an increase of the general uneasiness. The India of 1903 was like a volcano ready to erupt.

In this India a spontaneous enthusiasm, born of the country's own needs, was necessary before the revolutionary movement could be properly formed; and for that, consciously or unconsciously, all eyes were turned toward Aurobindo Ghose. The plan which he envisaged and on which he was working could be revealed only to minds in a fit state to receive it. No ground in which to sow the seed and bring it to harvest could be more favorable than that of Nivedita's mind and character, prepared as it had been long ago by the sacrifices of her own Irish ancestors. It was this quality of personal surrender, of boundless love for Ireland transformed into a fervent Indian patriotism, which provided the vitality that radiated from her.

Henry W. Nevinson, who was a friend of Nivedita's, wrote of her ten years later: "I do not know whether on the religious side it could be said of Nivedita, as of the philosopher, that she was drunk with God; but on the side of daily life and political thought it might certainly be said that she was drunk with India."

Nobody could have called her gentle. She was, rather, a kind of prophet, possessed of a courage that was more masculine than feminine, and refusing to countenance any weakness or criticism. The almost harsh nonconformist rationalism and independence of her nature, which had been in conflict with her emotionalism, had achieved a harmony; as we now say, a sublimation. Going back over her life, one can trace the process. Now, in the very austerity of her inner life, she possessed not only a freedom but an acute judgment which many of those around her feared without being able to do without it. Every positive movement that she detected was commended at its true value. She loathed any kind of morbid sentimentality. If any of her friends were attacked she brought a biting sarcasm to the defense; she was their shield and buckler, and she gloried in it.

At the Sunday breakfasts there would always be a few students hovering about her, hoping to help her and the work, in some way: to carry a message, to act as guide for a stranger in Calcutta, to translate a Bengali text. How she loved these young

people! "Are they not my reserve capital?" she said proudly. She would make them come forward and state their opinions at her Sunday gatherings, although they preferred to stand at one side listening to what was being said, in the same respectful attitude they adopted before their parents; then as soon as the other visitors had left they would rush up to her to learn her reactions. The most enthusiastic and fearless of these young men was Barindra Ghose, just arrived from Baroda, where for the past two years he had been undergoing initiation by his brother Aurobindo into his future work. He was twenty years old. He had first seen Swami Vivekananda when he was fifteen. He was all afire with zeal.

"I came to Calcutta with the idea of preaching the cause of independence, as a political missionary. Nothing shall stop me!" he declared.

"Good!" Nivedita replied, showing no surprise at this pugnacious attitude. "Your aim is noble; but—are you ready? Remember, you are not born for yourself but for your neighbor, for your own kind, for humanity in the sum."

"Yes, on condition that you are our Joan of Arc!" he answered. "That you show us the way. We need you. Let us march behind you and all will be well, even if we don't know where your banner leads. Give your orders. We will work together, even if you are in Calcutta and I am in the villages of Bengal."

There was a pleading, and at the same time almost threatening, note in his voice. Like thousands of other young men to whom Nivedita had spoken during her travels, Barindra Ghose was seeking comrades who would constitute a unified group. He was impatient. Nivedita reassured him:

"If you are still isolated, I will help you. That is why I am here. The leaders are here, too, but the work of the pioneers will be hard. I know fellow captains and fellow crewmen, to toil along the same lines and exchange ideas to good effect. Take heart! The way is opening before you."

Barindra's work in Bengal was the organization in the villages—even the most remote—of a chain of *Samitis*, or youth or-



ganizations, which would meet under all kinds of pretexts, but with the real aim of providing a civic and political education and opening the eyes of the young to the "affairs of the nation." Similar youth organizations had already been established in the Deccan under the leadership of the outspoken Nationalist leader Bel Gangadhar Tilak. In smoky little grain shops, on the terraced roofs of private houses, young men would meet to hear about the lives of Mazzini and Garibaldi, to read exhortations from Swami Vivekananda, to listen to the warlike incidents of the *Mahabharata* and to comments on the *Bhagavad Gita*. The number of *samitis* increased daily.

Nivedita's own dream at this time was to found in Swami Vivekananda's name (as he had done in the name of Sri Ramakrishna) an association which would gather together the future disciples of her guru's national idea. "I feel myself able to make ten thousand Vivekanandas," she wrote, "for just as he could understand and make Ramakrishnas, so I can see in him the things he himself could not. My object will be to keep a set of boys six months, and then to send them out for six months' travel; again six months of study, and so on. . . ." From this dedicated organization she saw emerging the watchful leaders of men who, in their turn, would organize "Indian Vivekananda societies" and "schools of active political education" throughout the whole vast country.

This plan was not in fact realized, but it served as a basis for Satis Chandra Mukherjee in giving a more solid foundation to the somewhat nebulous and intermittent student organization called "The Dawn." The organization had been born in a wave of his enthusiasm years ago, when he had heard Swami Vivekananda preach the Hindu civilization in America. The articles in his monthly review—also named *The Dawn*—ceased then to be exclusively philosophical and began to emphasize social questions, under such headings as "Cottage Industries," "Customs and Manners," and "Village Life." In his organization he offered a complete political education, while insisting on brahmacharya and governing the choice of the members by a strict moral ruling. From among the young men who lived

in poor overcrowded student hostels in the capital, a thousand responded to his appeal. Here was an asceticism which fired a youth eager to give of itself.

The teaching of "The Dawn" had its foundation in the *Bhagavad Gita*, on which one of the senior monks of the Rama-krishna mission lectured without allowing his students to be led astray in empty philosophical discussion. His subject was "What it is to sacrifice one's life for an ideal." Nivedita attended these lectures, and the students crowded around her to hear what she thought of them. In the *Gita* she saw a boundless source of power. "You have in your hands the most perfect instrument that exists," she said. "Carry over its teaching into your daily lives. When will the real fighter in the good cause rise up again, the *Gita* in one hand and a sword in the other?" Then she added:

"A hero whose footsteps we can easily follow left us only the other day. . . . Swami Vivekananda is quite near to us. We can still walk in his shadow."

For several years Nivedita played an important part in the Dawn Society, dealing for the most part with the subject of Nationality. This was a new idea to discuss, and its rudiments had to be elaborated in some detail. To do this she had recourse to evolutionist theories, and in the nature of the country and the characteristics of its land and waters she sought the elements that had gone to make up man in his environment. She looked at India from its dim beginnings to its future epochs, from the point of view of an idealistic Indian patriot. The logic of her arguments was such as to checkmate any opponent, even when at one and the same time she eulogized her friend and mentor Romesh Chunder Dutt for his unswerving loyalty to the British government, and sowed the seeds of revolt in the minds of the young! "Shun government service! Shun any service!" she repeated.

The students used to call her "White Mountain," because of her fair complexion and her somewhat sharp features. Her white skin was for them an accident; it had been accepted, like her blue eyes. She was not a "*memsab*," but the sister of all

Hindus. She belonged to the clan of Satis Chandra Mukherjee, who was venerated like a guru. Her pupils would tolerate no criticism of her.

There is no doubt that she inspired the most noble passions in her hearers, although if she had not worn the robe of a nun her pupils might often have been divided by jealousy. As it was, they all had a touching personal pride in her. Some of them said:

"We have often been told of the sages of olden times. Nivedita is one of them. She has overthrown the barriers of time. Strengthened by the life of the West, and its freedom, she has come back into a familiar environment, to serve those whom she had loved before."

It was to these pupils that Nivedita gave the best of herself, widening their vision and showing them the close relationship between social ideas (which have progressed simultaneously but differently in India and Europe) and their possible points of application. She made them feel that they were free members of a great nation, looking beyond the narrow circle of their ancestral families while still preserving their traditions. She was grateful to the Hindu mothers whose ambition was renunciation, but she wanted their sacrifice to goad their sons who were ready for action and to fight for the nation. "Brahmacharins are necessary," she said, "but not young men whose ideal is passivity. I want you to be active, with the brahmacharya of a hero, assimilating all the experiences of life whatever they may be, without running away from them. For love and hatred are dualities which will disappear. I want men who can face life squarely and find God in the manifestation of their sacrifice. The goddess of your worship, Mother India, dwells in famine, in suffering, and in poverty rather than on the altars where you offer her flowers and incense. She is where your sacrifice is!

"If you want to know the real India," she would often add, "dream the dreams of Akbar and Ashoka. Patriotism is not learned in books. It is a feeling which seizes the whole being:

it is at once the blood and the marrow; it is in the air one breathes and the sound one hears!"

In late April, 1903, Swami Sadananda set out with six specially selected students for the north of India, and Nivedita was overjoyed. She had collected the necessary money and obtained parental permission for the boys' trip, and she infused in them the medieval guilds' spirit of comradeship going from village to village. She sent this first group to Kedarnath, the temple of Lord Shiva in the Himalayas, and she dreamed of other, similar tours to Puranic, Jain, Buddhist, and Dravidian India. Although her plan for a Students' Hostel was premature and could not be carried through, a second expedition took place the next year. "Sadananda's life seems to have opened," she wrote to Miss MacLeod at this time. "He is no longer a servant, but a great teacher and leader—and still with the same humility and faithfulness to anyone who will teach him something!"

During May, 1903, she lectured at one of the Midnapore samitis. The boys welcomed her with shouts of "Hip, hip, hurrah!" but she cut their outburst short. "Have you become so hybrid that you express your approval in foreign slogans?" she said. "Repeat after me, '*Vah Guru ki fate!* Victory to the Gurul!'"

She spoke thirteen times in five days. "When one can do this sort of thing it is generally of some value," she wrote. But she had one great difficulty to overcome. "The boys find it hard to understand my lectures," the letter continued. "They go over their heads. I try to use all instruments, but I see very plainly that I have to find channels to speak through others, and the ideas become modified. I thought to turn the world upside down, so strong was the life I felt within me, and I am crying to the winds and only the winds take up and echo my cry. . . ." Then she summed up:

"I would like to do a great service, or at least to make an utter sacrifice."

Had she not yet given everything?

## 35. *The Nivedita School*

THE GREAT institution which is now called the *Nivedita School*, in the street of the same name in Calcutta, had opened its doors very humbly at the beginning of April, 1903. With a big nail, hammered in with a stone, a workman affixed a printed notice to the door of a house:

### THE HOUSE OF THE SISTERS

#### *Calls—Classes—Library*

"But the plate says nothing of the fact that we also have a Mohammedan man called *Charming* to do the hard work," wrote Nivedita, with one of the flashes of gaiety which do not appear often in her letters, perhaps, but which must have been an important factor in her charm, "and Charming brought a goat! It is the size of a small cow and is perpetually eating through its rope. . . . And we are in terror that our Brahman neighbors will suddenly realize that it is a Mohammedan goat. . . . My household is growing, and bids fair to grow more and more, so I cannot say that we can assume holy indifference to the joy of it."

For the people of the neighborhood, the "Sisters" meant Nivedita, who had been accepted as one of the Bagh Bazar community three years before; Christine, who had dedicated her life to this work with her usual perseverance; and Bet, who had succeeded in gathering together about twenty girls for a sewing class.

Nivedita's first experimental school had been in existence from November, 1898, to the end of May, 1899. She had hoped to inaugurate this new one in January of 1903. But one thing

and another—including an epidemic of plague which kept Swami Sadananda busy in the organization of assistance—had made it advisable to delay the opening until after Christine's arrival from Mayavati. The undertaking was sufficiently revolutionary to demand great tact, imagination, and ingenuity, as well as administrative ability.

For at that time all book learning was forbidden to girls from "orthodox" circles, and all contact with foreigners was avoided. And, for whatever strata of the population, there were very few girls' schools in Calcutta. Among the followers of the progressive Brahmo-Samaj movement, there was the *Native Ladies' Normal and Adult School*, expanded into the *Victoria Institution for Girls*, which had been founded in 1871 by Keshab Chandra Sen on his return from England. Nivedita had been invited to work in this school, but her real aim was to devote herself to children of mothers who were entirely without education. Christine worked there at different periods. There were other schools with the same aims as Nivedita's, such as that of Mataji Tapaswini, *Mahakali Pathshala*, which Swami Vivekananda had visited, and that of Gauri Ma, who, while quite young, had been initiated by Sri Ramakrishna himself. Gauri Ma had dedicated her life to God, Lord Krishna, before withdrawing for a long period into the Himalayas. Her school, strictly orthodox in its policy, was in a very flourishing condition. A good deal of her time was spent with Sri Sarada Devi.

Her school, thanks to her influence over the orthodox families of Bagh Bazar, was audaciously able to group together, with the parents' consent, children from such widely different castes as Brahman, Kayastha, Kaibarta, and Gowala. Once she and Christine Greenstidel had taken the decision to collaborate, they simply let the torrent of Hindu life, with all its raciness, its apprehensions, and fantasy, pour into the house. They made *The House of the Sisters* the center of interest in Bagh Bazar. Three or four times a month, for example, Nivedita produced a sacred drama, with the help of the Belur monks, like those that were played in the courts of temples, and all the families of the district would be invited.

On these afternoons the women would arrive in closed carriages and would sit behind dark green curtains of bamboo splints, hung across every arch and doorway that gave access to the court; there, white-veiled and unperceived, they would listen and enjoy the play. Sometimes the rustle of a fan would be heard, the clink of jewelry, a whispered comment. The children, sisters and brothers, sat in the middle of the courtyard. On a little platform hung with draperies, decorated with flowers, and lighted by a huge kerosene lamp, was installed the *kathak*, the traditional narrator engaged for the occasion, who spoke and mimed the epic poems for hours on end. Often one of the Swamis of Belur read the *chandi*, a sacred book in praise of the Divine Mother, or Yogin Ma, one of the widows from the house of Sri Sarada Devi, told Puranic stories.

Nivedita and Christine stayed with the women, whose presence lent an air of great dignity to the proceedings. High-caste Hindu women were glad to come, in spite of the fact that the two "Sisters" were foreigners. Nivedita's ordination authorized the strictest of them to come to her house, and the presence of Yogin Ma put them all at ease. Moreover, they saw about them here only familiar objects of the kind they were used to; this house was but a prolongation of their own. "Will these women come also, at other times, to learn the arts of life? Will they entrust me with their children?" Nivedita wondered. She had to find a way of introducing positive elements into their lives without destroying any ritualistic aspect, and to awaken in this first generation a desire for self-expression.

Several weeks were to elapse before any of these meetings of women or girls could be called a "class," but the die had been cast and the school had begun to live. Nivedita's big family had grouped itself about her. Christine organized the first lessons. While their fingers were busy with their needles, the pupils sang the sweetest melodies of Ramprasad or Chandidas. They laughed with a naïve grace, blossoming forth like oleander flowers in the sun. Their memories retained all that was taught them, and they in their turn passed on their newly acquired knowledge to the women of their *zenana* who questioned them. A

map of India on the wall captured their imagination because they were shown the relationship between the courtyard of their house, the town, Bengal, and India itself. They touched with their fingers the spots of dark forests where the gods live, and the burning deserts of the Punjab where the sun dies each evening. In their dreams they saw the white shores of Cape Comorin, and the land of the eternal snows where in the Himalayas the goddess Parvati holds sway.

The character of these bi-weekly classes changed when, emboldened by what they had learned, the older pupils (who were not yet fifteen years of age) asked to be taught to read and write. They made use of every trick to get into the kindergarten, and even hid in the big carriage (Nivedita had been given a horse and carriage for the use of the school) which, with Bet as chaperone, collected the smallest girls every morning. Once at the school, they could hardly be sent home, and the classes had to be doubled. "Today, oppression turns women into foxes," Swami Vivekananda had declared. "A day will come when they will be as strong as lions!"

By the beginning of 1904, the school seemed fairly well organized. It was open four days a week from midday until five o'clock. Classes were overcrowded, the pupils were huddled together, and the heat was suffocating in the low room; but nobody complained. In her first report, Nivedita wrote:

Altogether, my children are the best material I have ever seen. The difficulties are the dreadful irregularities in coming, and the fact that, to begin with, they never know how to obey at all. Discipline simply does not exist. All lessons, however, tend to get over this. The first which I found perceptibly useful was stick-laying, then drilling, pattern-making, drawing, sewing, mat-making, and brushwork. They learned obedience and order with wonderful speed. They have at first no habits of observation. I cannot remember that any of them ever brought me a curious insect, or a feather, or a flower. When I received my tiny dog straight from his mother, and kissed him, the children went home speculating on the possible cause of his good fortune.\*

\* The dog is considered an impure animal, and is not cared for.



They agreed that nothing but good *karma* could possibly account for it. A curious abstract idea to occur to children!

How quickly they learned feeling! About their country, their own strength. . . .

Nivedita had introduced the teaching of patriotism and hero worship by prayer and the recitation of the mantra, "*Bharatvarsha*,"—Mother India—at every free moment. She trained the children in silence and concentration upon the meaning of these words; then she would tell them stories of Bengali, Maharashtra, and Rajput heroines facing death with honor, of Ramanuja in the South and Guru Nanak in the North in their mission of fraternity through devotion.\* When the children went back to their homes, they had offered their very life to the Indian nation.

When Nivedita was asked, "What is your program?" she replied, "The school is an education for life." This was true. For the *Swadeshi* exhibitions, of 1904 and 1905, the pupils wove silks to serve as models for the weavers, embroidered a national flag, drew flowers for the dyers' blocks. They carved spindles out of reeds, and spun cotton as fine as hair. They made jams and condiments of every kind. This work was only a game. To it was added a little book learning: arithmetic and history.

"What language do your pupils speak?" Nivedita was asked one day.

"Bengali. After three years, they will learn Sanskrit; after four, a little English."

"What books do you read?"

"The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*."

"What is your religion?"

"We live under the influence of Sri Sarada Devi, and we open our hearts to the Mother of mothers."

Nivedita herself took scarcely any classes. She was seen little; but her presence in the house could be felt unmistakably. When she went off on a lecture tour the school dozed, because all

Ramanuja was a holy teacher of love and mercy, in the twelfth century. Guru Nanak, who was born in 1459, was the first of the ten gurus who established the Sikh nation in the Punjab.

force of suggestion continued to be entirely hers. But Christine was succeeding in her tasks and rightly filling her role. She had lived through years of strain and responsibility, and it had made her as strong as steel. Nivedita, watching her working, thought—and confessed the thought in letters to Miss MacLeod: “I never knew how fretful and feverish and ineffective my life was until I saw Christine’s. Her whole time is given to study, work, and visiting. She lives here without fuss, without complexity—and so simple with the simple. She is the ideal itself.”

Financially, the school was wholly dependent upon the Nivedita Guild of Help in Britain and America, the funds of which had been collected through her lectures. But this support was not enough to provide for maintenance and progress. Nivedita had dug deep into her coffers to start the school, and it was still very much in the initial stages. When additional money came in, through her American friends, a new class would be set up. When money was short, that class would be stopped, and the pupils vanish; they returned at the first opportunity, like disciples to their guru.

Nivedita had decided to refuse all outside assistance from zealous benefactors who would have imposed their own views upon the conduct of the school, and in this decision she was unshaken: she was determined to remain her own mistress. One source of danger lay in the criticisms of the few foreign missionary schools. When they questioned her, she replied, somewhat ironically, “We constitute an autonomous ‘university city!’ ” She was accused of pride, but she was not troubled by that!

In November, 1904, money difficulties became so great, however, that she had to consult Miss MacLeod. Would they have to close the school? Christine was the vital link with the Order of Ramakrishna, but Nivedita not only took upon herself the entire authority, but was—with her writing and her constant lecturing—the sole provider. For the greater part of the day she shut herself up in her room to work, tolerating no presence near her except that of a little maidservant who, without a word, would bring her her tea and then would squat in the corner telling her beads. Unable to study or to make herself

useful about the house, the child could only pray. "Pray, then," Nivedita had said. "That can be your work, as it is mine to write newspaper articles! We each have our task in serving the Divine Mother!"

Two important events in the development of the school took place, however, in the middle of the year 1904; the first was the acquisition—in spite of financial difficulties—of the house next door; the second was Rabindranath Tagore's offer of his beautiful family house for a normal school. Swami Vivekananda's words were still ringing in Nivedita's ears: "Be brave, Margot! Take every opportunity. Only have courage, and I will send the means." But she refused this offer nevertheless. For her pupil-teachers, at the same time, she proposed a program of social studies which had been established with Rabindranath Tagore. The idea was bold, but inspiration was culled solely from the esoteric value of the sacred texts. "The *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, the *Vedanta*, are our masters," she said. "Never let foreign ideas take the place of our ideas and cause confusion in our morals and our ways of reacting. To emancipate the greatest number of people most easily and effectively, it is necessary to choose familiar ideals and forms, and in every case it is necessary to make progression absolutely continuous, so that there be no sharp incongruity among the elements of early experience."

It was for this reason that Nivedita attached so much importance to her kindergarten, where, without false modesty, the girls exhibited their living mysticism, and their joy in being the outward form through which the Divine Mother was constantly manifesting Herself. "And for that," she said, "our epic poems must be the basis of the imagination, because it is with the threads of our history that its hope must be woven. One is not born a hero. It is the pressure of heroic thoughts that makes heroes come to the surface. Deep within them, all human beings have a thirst for sacrifice. No other thirst is more violent. Let us give it its place! Such an education will make a 'nation' of India!"

For the children of the school, old and young, Nivedita remained always something of a mystery. She was worshiped but

feared also, for she could become passionately angry. Christine was more gentle and easygoing, but she did not inspire the same enthusiasm. Nivedita had a persuasive voice which won hearts and a serenity in her eyes which made the children say, "Nivedita is perhaps Sarasvati herself dwelling in school with us. She has the pale complexion and the pious eyes of the goddess."

The feast of Sarasvati was therefore doubly important. It was celebrated on the fifth day of the January moon. Nivedita had gone barefooted from house to house to invite each family of Bagh Bazar. A Brahman, specially engaged for the occasion, prepared copious curries and sweetmeats which would be handed round immediately after the puja. About fifty poor widows of the neighborhood were given the run of the house on that day, and installed themselves on the terraced roof. On this one day of the year Nivedita wore a silk sari, and the red carmine spot was on her ash-smeared forehead, between the eyebrows. When she appeared, with an earthen vessel under her arm, to go to the Ganges and fetch the sacred water, there were shouts of joy. Nivedita was the "Mother" of the School. . . .

Then she celebrated the puja before the shrine that had been specially erected, which was adorned with masses of flowers, peacock feathers, pencils, and books, and bore the earthen image of Sarasvati seated upon the back of a white swan, plucking her *vina*. Nivedita officiated with slow movements, sitting before the huge red copper trays piled with their offerings of flowers and fruits. Yogin Ma acted as acolyte and dictated the mantras and prayers, which Nivedita repeated.

"*Jaya Mâ Sarasvati!*" [Victory to Sarasvati!] shouted the children.

"*Jaya!*" Nivedita responded. "All is prayer."

Very late in the afternoon, as the last guests were leaving the house, the children let off firecrackers and lit Bengal lights. Nivedita herself waited until there was silence everywhere. When the image of Sarasvati was immersed in the Ganges the next day, along with the flowers and the garlands, the school was, and remained, engrossed in the happy learning on which the goddess had conferred her blessing.

## 36. *Dynamic Religion and United India*

WHEN NIVEDITA was asked, "What are you doing?" she replied, "I am a teacher, and I have my own school." But she was also one of the five members of the political committee which Aurobindo Ghose had appointed in Bengal to unite in a single organization the small and scattered groups of rebels which had sprung into existence and were acting without reference to one another. The other members were P. Mitra, a lawyer and revolutionary leader, Jotin Banerje, C. R. Das, and Surendranath Tagore. Until the time when Aurobindo Ghose himself came to settle in Bengal, in 1905, the committee was only intermittently successful in its liaison work; but it did enlist tens of thousands of young men in the nationalist movement, and created a living body of young pioneers of Indian independence.

This committee conducted an underground activity, in which every member was responsible for his own small sphere of influence and knew nothing of the work of the others. Nivedita's part, however, was almost wholly concerned with the open outer movement, and with the press, and in it she was swept by successive waves of enthusiasm and despair. Various public events—the magnificent Durbar, the University Bill which restricted the number of Hindu students in the university, the proposal to divide into two separate administrative districts—aroused criticism and opposition among the progressive and

highly cultivated Bengali people. Nivedita, as a journalist, was in the thick of the fight. She countered the argument that a literary education would render the students incapable of adapting themselves to the economic conditions of Indian agriculture and industry. And when Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, called attention, in a speech in Calcutta, to the extreme instability of the Indians' moral character, she attacked him directly and led in the defensive assault.

The historian and pamphleteer in her placed themselves at India's disposal, and it was child's play for her to delve into diplomatic history and to provide material with which the Indian newspapers could repudiate the Viceroy's charge. She summed up her personal feeling in a letter at this time: "The point in India's wrongs that fires me is the right of India to be India, the right of India to think for herself, the right of India to knowledge. Were this not the great grievance, I might be fired by her right to bread, to justice, to other things, but this outweighs all."

She now had definite connections with several newspapers, for which she wrote editorials. It was a direct way of influencing public opinion, and she reached a far larger audience than with her lectures. In fact, she more or less abandoned public speeches—in which she was easily drawn into controversial subjects and often spoke above her hearer's heads—in favor of journalism, which allowed her every freedom of expression. It is impossible to know to what precise extent she collaborated with the Bengali newspapers of Calcutta which appeared in English, for she allowed articles which she wrote to be published anonymously or over the signatures of friends. Several of her pieces were signed "*Vox Ignota*." Some of her 1904 titles were "The Veins of the Ruling Chiefs," "Some Measures of Educational Reform," "The Native States," "The Mohammedans and British Rule," "Politics in Schools and Colleges," and "The Viceroy and the Partition Question." Sir Francis Younghusband's Tibetan expedition occupied a good deal of her attention and was the subject of a number of critical articles. Her articles were spontaneous and lively, and better for their purpose than

long-thought-out and methodical work would have been, but they were conspicuous for their careful planning as well as their style and their violent tone. It even happened that because of her the *Statesman* was at one time under suspicion, and her friend S. K. Ratcliffe, the editor, somewhat perturbed.

Every morning Motilal Ghose, the editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, called upon Nivedita in Bagh Bazar. He was a member of the Congress and worked hand in hand with Aurobindo Ghose, providing Nivedita with one of the channels through which she expressed herself most freely. Their friendship was deep, and their confidence reciprocal. The fact that Motilal Ghose was a fervent Vaishnava—a worshiper of Lord Vishnu, whose principal incarnations are Rama and Krishna—added piquancy to their conversations, pure Shivaite—worshiper of Shiva—as she was! There grew up between them a deep brother-and-sister relationship which was demonstrated in the customary religious ceremony at the coming of the new August moon, when brothers pay homage to their sisters: on that occasion Motilal Ghose addressed to Nivedita the usual brother's speech, and adorned her with garlands.

Her ambition at this time was to found, with the advice of her friend William T. Stead, founder and editor of the *London Review of Reviews*, a great Indian review. "The whole task now," she wrote in a letter, "is to give the word *nationality* to India in all its breadth and meaning. The rest will do itself. India must be obsessed by this great conception. Hindu and Mohammedan must become one in it, with a passionate admiration of each other. It means new views of history and of customs, and it means the assimilation of the whole Ramakrishna-Vivekananda idea in religion, the synthesis of all religious ideas. . . . The one essential fact is the realization of Indian nationality by the nation!"

For the implementation of this task, she gave up going to Japan as she had been urged to do, to take part in the Congress of Religions, and, later, was obliged also to refuse Mr. Stead's invitation to become his "Indian correspondent" in London, though this latter would have meant valuable contacts

with highly instructive minds and the opportunity for firsthand study of European politics. In the struggle which she was undertaking against almost insurmountable obstacles she knew that she would meet with ultimate defeat; and she accepted that. But every effort set up a chain of consequences and created a new wave of vitality.

"Our work is to create an idea," she wrote, "the idea that was Swami Vivekananda's. But ideas are brought to birth in the dust of printing offices, and the offensive air of crowds, and the inability to get to summer resorts, and so on! As I look at the history of the world, I see that no idea was ever transmitted in its purity. Therefore one is doomed to struggle always; and if the struggle is crowned with success, that success will be perhaps its worst defeat. Or it will meet with defeat more obvious still."

The summer of 1903, which had promised to be a period of relaxation, brought only a change of scene. Driven from Calcutta by the plague, with all her household, Nivedita found all her old political allies in Darjeeling. They visited one another's villas, or sat together under the deodars. Christine was struggling with the Bengali language. Jagadis Bose, who had been somewhat neglected in the fever of Nivedita's activities, was now given a good deal of her time. Mrs. Bull was expected to arrive from Japan within a few months.

Nivedita's personal desire was to put the finishing touches to her book, *The Web of Indian Life*, from the sale of which she hoped to earn a large sum for the school. And at last she could note, "I finished my book at 4 p. m. on September 7th! It is a book dedicated to my guru, in which I have said the things that he would have liked said." Begun in collaboration with Romesh Chunder Dutt, conceived along Patrick Geddes' geographical lines, it was none the less like a river which derived its impetus from a single source. "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, this book is in short the Asiatic character," she wrote, "both of messenger and message." In it she reveals an ideology whose meaning has long since been lost sight of by the West—that the concept of spiritual family



embraces the whole of Asia. "The relation between the guru and his disciples is always one of the most vital elements in the life of Asia," she states. "Whole nations are the disciples of a single man. They are his family. They strive to approximate to his method of life, in dress, food, manner, and even to some extent in language. Such facts make religion in the East a matter of enormous social consequence."

It was in Darjeeling, in September, that she received invitations from several Moslem centers in North India to visit them at the time of the National Congress sessions. This was the longed-for co-operation between Hindus and Moslems; and Nivedita's voluminous correspondence testifies to her share in the matter. With her guru's message of unity on her lips, she felt entirely free between the two groups, and she addressed several Moslem audiences. She found new inspiration, now, in renewing her contact with large audiences. She perceived the unity of which she was speaking, and transmitted it. Early one morning in a small railroad station, as she was about to take her train, a Moslem deputation brought her a present of a basket of oranges, with an address of thanks written on a piece of birchbark.

These signs of unity were the rich result of her moving between the various religious communities. Her task was heavy, but her determination was strong. She was the boldest artisan imaginable, knowing full well that a single missing stone in a mosaic draws attention to its patch of shade. And for Nivedita her India was nothing but light.

During the following year—1904—she played her high cards in a relentless struggle. The first card she played was in taking the words which her guru had pronounced so often and interpreting them in her own fashion and according to the times: *Dynamic Religion and United India*. . . . Then she played the card of Budh-Gaya.\* But both "cards" were themselves reflections of her veneration for Swami Vivekananda, and her cherished respect for his memory.

"Six years ago," she wrote in a letter to Miss MacLeod on

\* See Chapter 38.

the anniversary of her initiation, "I was called *Nivedita*. . . . May it be blessed to his service! . . . It was also foretold that I should die between the ages of forty-two and forty-nine. I am now thirty-six. So I suppose I shall see this cycle through. I fancy I shall die in 1912.\* Oh, will these years make a difference to the position of India? Shall I be allowed to see that I was of some use to Swamiji? If I could only feel that his great soul went free, and could play and be at ease, because on the earth-side I existed—in that feeling would lie Heaven and Eternity. I don't care the least about liberation [*mukti*]. I don't even want him to forgive my sins or be sweet to me. I don't mind about my relation to him personally. I only want to carry his burden, and leave him free, free to enjoy God. Oh, what a soul, of whom one can dream such a dream and know that it is true!"

In Calcutta Town Hall, on the 26th of February, 1904, before an audience of twelve hundred people, Nivedita spoke of a Hinduism that lay in the mind of the people who were wedded to the soil. "During the last fifty years," she said, "men inspired by an ideal of social reform have been the first to rise. Then followed a determined rush forward toward a political ideal. Third, many kinds of religious revival have taken place. Of course the problem of India is a religious one; but there will never be a solution unless the truth is grasped that the goal is to be sought in the great word, *Nationality*. Religion has never dwelt in a creed that divides man from man; it is in a religion that becomes a *nation-force* that is the crying necessity for unity." And she called the women forward, dwelling upon the supreme obligation that rested upon every Indian man to procure for the women of his household the education from which should come the dynamic force of the Indian nationality, the dawn of which was already manifest today. . . .

In March, Nivedita spoke at Benares, and in the neighboring towns. Her life was one of intense movement. Since her meeting with the Gaekwar of Baroda, at Baroda, she had remained in close contact with the Indian Prince, and he had invited her to meet him in Naini Tal. Then it happened that

\* Nivedita died in October, 1911, with all her work completed.

at Kathgodan she saw Swami Sadananda passing through with a band of students from the Dawn Society, en route for the mountains; she herself felt tired and preoccupied, but she could not stop. Her sole holidays that year consisted of two days of freedom spent in Calcutta on the Ganges. She took a boat, which was anchored off Dakshinesvar; the river whispered many secrets to her, and the garden recalled powerful memories that no one but herself knew.

"O Mother," she prayed, "grant me the strength of the Thunderbolt, and words with unspoken Power in them and weight of utterance. . . ."

And she wrote to Miss MacLeod:

"Pray for these things for me, for I still have much work to do for my guru."

## 37. *The Woman, at Home*

IN DECEMBER, Nivedita had opened her house to Gopaler Ma, the aged Brahman widow who had been the first to introduce her to Bagh Bazar. Worn out, ill, almost in her second childhood, the old lady had no one left in the world to look after her. Now Nivedita, who loved and worshiped her, gave her one of the small independent rooms that opened on the courtyard of her house. Gopaler Ma had a disciple, Kusum, who attended to her physical needs: cooking her food, bringing her water from the Ganges, cleaning out her room with cowdung. Gopaler Ma continued her life of surrender, coupled with the strictest orthodoxy.

In her turn, she provided Nivedita with that radiant maternal affection before which Sri Ramakrishna had opened his heart, and gave her back the sense of solitude which her active life had lost.

Nivedita's existence was difficult. She was often the butt of attack and severe criticism. Her zeal in grouping ambitious men around her in the service of India had led to the expansion of her personal life—her very personality—and the renunciation of that retreat within herself which is individual privacy; it was this last which Gopaler Ma restored. Every morning Nivedita would go and sit on her doorstep, waiting until the old lady beckoned her in. Gopaler Ma would be chanting her prayers. When she saw Nivedita her wrinkled face would crease into a smile of joy, and her eyes would sparkle. She motioned her,

then, to come forward, and she always placed a choice bit of fruit in her mouth. Gopaler Ma lived with the gods in her room, but she could not speak of them; any words, moreover, would have frightened them away, along with the divine musicians who, for her, filled the air with their music. Nivedita knew this, and kept silence. She massaged her aged friend when she was in pain, and she took care of her like a delicate child in whom the Divine Mother was hiding in order to be revered in weakness. For Nivedita, too, Gopaler Ma was something of her own mother, to whom she could render no service. . . .

"I feel thrilled," she wrote in a letter at this time, "when I am with Gopaler Ma. The words of Saint Elizabeth sound in my ears: 'What is this to me that the Mother of my Lord should visit me?' For I believe that in Gopaler Ma is sainthood as great as that of a *Paramahansa*—a soul fully free. I feel that if I can only worship her enough, blessings will descend on all whom I love, through her. Could more be said?"

In this attitude of affection she kept asking herself a single question: "Would Swamiji be pleased with me?" Writing this to a friend, she continued:

I am glad to work alone as he did. He cried for men! But he did not know that until the curtain had fallen it would not be clear what the idea was for which he had lived, when that idea should stand revealed. Men come of themselves now. No one is necessary. He is the magnet; and that draws the steel dust of itself. . . . His heart must be greater than I can imagine, but I need to feel that his will flows through all my life, suffusing it with benedictions and approvals—and yet it is all so unlike what he laid out for me! In so many respects I seem to do so completely just the thing he warned me not to do. . . . Only the ache is left for a mariner's compass, to direct one's course through the ocean of complexity.

Such words were doubtless the result of exhaustion. She had been, and was, overtaxing her strength. She laid aside her responsibilities, therefore, and, face to face with herself, remained nothing more than an anonymous sanniyasini. Fasting,

praying, refusing all consolation from without, she meditated with Gopaler Ma. She longed to be, as in her house she was, nothing but a transparent prism that transmitted life; under her own roof she was a beggar. In her room, familiar sounds reached her. How harmonious everything was without her intervention!

Christine reigned supreme in the school, incarnating that joyful and peaceful ideal which Swamiji had so desired. Thanks be to her! Nivedita observed Christine's life without envy. Should she call her happy, she wondered, or pity her? Christine gave her love its course, but it ran like a placid stream beside Nivedita's headlong torrent.

"Her nature is all one," Nivedita wrote, "and she can yield to her own instincts because they always lead her right. She is more the witness than anyone I ever saw. Love is everything to her, but it is a single, ardent, solitary passion, not a roaring or all-embracing love! She is at once the most fortunate and the saddest among women. . . . I have shed hot bitter tears over the revelation, saying, 'My whole life is a failure,' and that hurt my guru even more than it did me. . . . I knew I was in the will of God, burnt up by it, devoured by it. . . . In me, sweetness was against strength and strength against sweetness, and I was not sure that my whole life was not indolence and self-indulgence."

Christine and Nivedita could laugh together, nevertheless, over the difference in their characters. Nivedita once said, "I want to stop writing and thinking, and become a convent scullery-maid, to be able to wash dishes or dig herbs, and think divine thoughts the while." But she also said, "I wish I were a queen, with the opportunities and powers, and even the pains, of sovereigns." Her aim was to serve that supreme verity which does not lessen one's responsibilities but rather deepens them; and she longed to serve with and not against it. Does not all progress consist in sustaining high things and working them gradually and firmly into every detail of life?

Sri Sarada Devi returned to Bagh Bazar in February, after a prolonged stay in her native village; and Nivedita, seeing

her for the first time since Swami Vivekananda's death, found in her the explanation of her own vision. "The Holy Mother is here," she wrote, just after her arrival, "so small, so thin, so dark—worn out physically, I should say, with village hardship and village life—but the same clear mind, the same stateliness, the same womanhood as before. O how many comforts I would like to give her! She needs a soft pillow, a shelf, and so many things. She is so crowded. People are about her, always."

Sarada Devi embraced Nivedita and asked her many questions. But the words meant little to this woman who understood every thought in its origins, in its very essence. Nivedita closed her eyes and let Sri Ma delve into her heart. There was no barrier between them.

Every day, now, she would spend a few minutes with Sarada Devi whenever she could, no matter at what hour. She brought her friends to her, and sought her blessing for the earnest young men she sent out on political missions. She brought trays of fruit and sweetmeats, which Sri Ma accepted and distributed to those about her. Sometimes the room would be so full of devotees in meditation that Nivedita would merely make her deep bow of greeting and depart, receiving only Sri Sarada's smile.

But one day Sarada Devi said to her: "My daughter, I have lately seen you in a vision, and you were clothed in gerrua." Confronted with these solemn words which meant, "I am ready to give you openly the yellow robe of the great renunciation," Nivedita trembled. "But I will not take it." She could hardly breathe. Her ears were throbbing. She looked into Sarada's eyes, and saw the divine light of Love.

She prostrated herself, and felt the hand of Sri Ma on her head, blessing her, ready to grant her that garb she had once wished for. That power which she had received from the hand of her guru had filled her life. Was there now any need to wear the ocher robe to bear his burden? No, it was no longer necessary. The white robe—symbol of obedience—was quite enough.

"Swamiji gave me openly only one little thing to guard—

Brahmacharya—and until life is ended," she wrote. "And of course in the great way, of taking no one close, of thinking no thought and speaking no word of human intimacy and affection, it has not been kept; and it is for him to say some day that I did his work in that also. But I know that he will. I know now that I have done right and all is well. Some day I shall be able to formulate the law. . . ."

Now, before Sarada Devi, Nivedita wept. The saintly woman, too, was moved to tears. The subject was never discussed again between them.

Obedience to her guru! That was the narrow path which had led her to this living renunciation whose flame, like that of camphor, leaves no trace. Swami Vivekananda had said to her: "Repeat always the name of Shiva—Shiva!—without ever tiring. It is the greatest of all prayers. It will overthrow every obstacle in your path." And this incantation always transported Nivedita to that former blessed pilgrimage along the Amarnath road, when she had not understood the great renunciation she had to go through. Now, all alone, she had to make the pilgrimage again in her heart, stage by stage, knowing that yonder there was no benevolent darshan of the god, but only the identity of the soul with God Himself. Was she now capable of it?

She recalled the physical weariness of her body, the difficulties of the road. She saw again the great sunset clouds picking out the face of the Guru of gurus, the supreme Master who is simultaneously time, space, sun, fire—the Master who is, in the soul of men, their own thirst for inner destruction so that they may be born again in purity. She heard, within herself, the heart of the world beating, the quivering of Shiva's trident as it stirs His creatures. . . . "You do not now understand," her guru had told her, "but it will go on working, and the effect will come some day. . . ."

"Yes, I have done the pilgrimage," Nivedita repeated, "and now I know. . . . Shiva is in my heart!"



## 38. *Budh-Gaya*

NIVEDITA'S LECTURES opposed British policy in India, and her name figured, because of her nationalist activities, upon a list of "persons to be watched." She also took a conspicuous part in what was known as the "Budh-Gaya case," the question of the care and jurisdiction of the holy temple, on the site where Gautama Buddha had received enlightenment, where Hindus, Buddhists, and devotees of other religions worship together.

To Nivedita, Budh-Gaya was not a shrine of Buddhism only, but a holy place of Indian nationalism. She set herself up as champion of the people and made the Budh-Gaya question an issue of national unity in the editorials of many papers. Eventually the "case" was settled by allowing Budh-Gaya to remain in the hands of the Mahant—the religious ruler—as the heart of Hinduism; and when that occurred the Mahant sent Nivedita a vivid token, a *vajra*, emblem of the Buddhist Thunderbolt. The gift was accompanied by a prayer: "May you be an empty channel for His will to flow through. . . ."

Meanwhile, she had not only visited Budh-Gaya herself—she came with a special blessing from Swami Brahmananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, and to her in her love for Mother India this shrine was an essential part of Hinduism—but she had organized, at Swami Brahmananda's suggestion, a tour which appeared to be in itself merely a historical and artistic pilgrimage. She was braving the censures of the British press with ironical unconcern.

The quality of the participants (about twenty in all) was to bring the leaders of public opinion into close personal contact

with the Mahunt. It was indeed a distinguished company of "pilgrims." Along with Nivedita and Christine Greenstidal were Mr. and Mrs. Rabindranath Tagore, with their children and nephews; Dr. and Mrs. Jagadis Bose; Mr. and Mrs. S. K. Ratcliffe; the son of the Prince of Tripura; Sir Jadunath Sarkar; Indranath Nandi; Professor Chandra Dey; most of Nivedita's more intimate friends and political associates; and three students under the special guidance of Swami Sadananda. The trip was to include a visit to the most famous Buddhist haunts, together with an inspection of the newly uncovered stupas, bas-reliefs, and inscriptions. The itinerary covered Sarnath, Benares, Rajagriha, and Nalanda with a stay of four days at Budh-Gaya. Nivedita had prepared a complete program of lectures and picnics. For the return journey she had also planned visits to Hindu and Moslem friends, who, in their turn, were ready to vie with one another in the lavish entertainment of their guests. The travelers set out during the October vacation of 1904, and the trip lasted almost a month.

Her friends soon discovered an aspect of Nivedita's nature of which they had no knowledge. With her passion for history, she revealed an uncanny instinct for evoking the past, and she was a punctiliously careful guide in all the party's learned researches. At the same time she remained always the receptive confidante. It was small wonder that her friends hung on her words.

After an early breakfast, Nivedita would read and comment upon a few pages from *The Light of Asia*, or from her own book, *The Web of Indian Life*. The pilgrims would discuss history, nationalism, and the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. She would often and gladly speak of the Lord Buddha.

"The Hindus who chose Sri Raramkrishna as their guru acted with the same discernment as the Hindus who, in days gone by, followed the greatest sadhu of their time, the victorious Buddha, in search of a purer life and a stricter faith," a letter from Sir Jadunath Sarkar had quoted her as saying. "If ever I write the life of Swami Vivekananda, I shall naturally describe him as the greatest sage of all time, and shall only mention Chaitanya, or the Vishnaiva sect to which he belonged, in passing. If, much later, his

torians, on the authority of my book, affirm that Ramakrishna's followers have seceded from Hindu society to form a caste apart from the Vishnaivas, or that they ousted the followers of Chaitanya, then they will only be making the same mistake as those who teach that Buddhism does not belong to us."

In the evening, the pilgrims sat on the tottering steps of the ruins and watched the glowworms. They meditated in the deepening peace. Nivedita would recall a personal experience, Rabindranath Tagore would sing a quiet melody. How delightful was the intimacy of these pauses that brought hearts and souls into contact!

"Tagore was a perfect guest," Nivedita noted, "with nothing of the spoiled child socially about him. He has a naïve sort of vanity in speech which is so childish as to be rather touching. He sang and chatted day and night, was always ready to entertain or be entertained, struggled all the time between work for the country and the national longing to seek liberation. He's a real poet, who sings and gladdens our souls!"

The Mahant received them like a king, with his faith as his treasure. The night before they left, however, Nivedita was suddenly seized with a fit of sadness and poured out her doubts to him. How many of the pupils she had brought, how many of her close friends who were leaving with deep satisfaction, had really absorbed something of Budh-Gaya's message of love and tolerance? Of this magnificent experience, what were they going to retain?

"Swami Vivekananda had indeed sowed the seeds of an effective spirituality," she said, "but every being must grow, shake off its bonds, and become a giant tree."

"Let the great Gardener bless each one of His plants," the monk responded. "Is it for us to understand aught of it?"

His outstretched palms called down the divine blessing, his smile welcomed it, his eyes bequeathed it. Nivedita bowed low before him, and touched his feet in homage.

Leaving Budh-Gaya, the travelers took the road the Buddha had followed by moonlight to Rajagriha, fifty miles away. They also went by night. An elephant for the women and children

opened the way. The men came next, surrounded by torch-bearers. Two halts were made each night, for rest and refreshment around a campfire. One of the pilgrims would recite the words of Lord Buddha in a rhythmic melody which all the others would take up in chorus. Once they halted in the middle of the jungle, at a ruined temple which seemed haunted by dancing shadows. Were they heroes miming their epics before the court of the gods, with nymphs stifling their plaintive cries? Laughter and crying rent the night air. Dawn showed the travelers a staircase of mossy stones leading from the temple to a lotus-covered pool. They bathed, and lay stretched out on the cool flat rocks.

One of Nivedita's unexpected pleasures during this trip was in the living history of old stones. She had always been interested in archeology, but this went further: here was a whole historical theory of Buddhist knowledge which developed and imposed itself upon her. At Rajagriha she was much excited at the sight of a huge Buddha in black stone—buried for centuries—rising from the sand. She went into the poorest hovels to see if the stone on which the village women crushed their spices were not some carved work, and she looked at every village well to find out if its edges were not made of terra cotta. She visited small artisan-sculptors and wood-engravers, at work on the same kind of figures that had been carved for two thousand years. "Oh, what a marvelous country," she cried. "There are unknown hands, unconscious of perfection, which indefinitely recreate the perfect forms of gods and sacred symbols. India cannot die. Its past, its present, and its future are one unity, as its traditional art is the expression of its social and religious life." Her first articles on Indian Art were written during this journey.

When she returned to Calcutta she said to Swami Brahmananda: "I shall now preach the message of unity through art. Art is one of India's great religions." And to her political friends she said: "I have seen on the stones the very image of Shakti. The Divine Energy we worship is an immortal reality. It is India itself!"

When questioned about the results of her pilgrimage, she smiled. "In his wisdom Buddha has sent us away rejoicing," she answered. "Infinitely great are the divine favors; but are our eyes capable of discerning them?"

## 39. *Svadeshi*

IT WAS inevitable that, in the early years of the century, Nivedita should fling herself heart and soul into that movement toward India's economic self-dependence which was to become known throughout the world under the name of *Svadeshi*. Several flourishing private industries in Bengal were founded on her initiative and with her financial assistance. She organized centers of supply and distribution of raw materials, and acted as a link between artisans, stockbrokers, and wholesalers. She interested herself in loans with low interest, and likewise established an assistance fund with interest-free loans but with strictly calculated repayments. She also took an interest in the elaboration of the statutes of the first co-operative societies. She worked tirelessly with young people, inspiring them, organizing them. And she insisted that practical labor of this kind must go hand in hand with religion itself.

One day, as she arrived at Belur by boat with Swami Sadananda, she saw crossing the lawn a well-built young man who was visibly a prey to great emotion. Paying no attention to the novices who crowded around her in welcome, she jumped ashore and called to the unknown youth.

"What have you come here for?"

"To find the strength to live and forget the world."

"Don't leave the world: that's not the right path," she said.

"I am seeking God alone," the young man answered stubbornly.

"God is in action, in the play of life," Nivedita retorted sternly. "The country needs all its strength. Come, I will show you how you can play your part."

Not clearly defined at the outset, Svadeshi was an attempt at nonco-operation with the government which passed gradually from theory to practice to become a methodical boycott of all English goods; later, it became also a rejection of every English cultural influence. This "revolution" meant that the poorest of the middle class, underpaid, underfed, badly housed, was ready to accept a still lower standard of living and to do without a number of daily necessities, in order to live a "national life." Nivedita had her own initial paraphrase of it.

"It is better for every man to have his own law of action, even if it be imperfect, than to have the law of another well applied," says the sacred *Gita*. To the students of the Dawn Society, Nivedita said, "Svadeshi is exactly that." She evoked for them a Hindu economic life, distinctly national although in every way embryonic, and yet infinitely preferable to the condition of an enslaved people. And how she loved her band of young patriots, who were seeking a regeneration from within, and not awaiting any external aid!

"All India is watching the struggle that is going on in Eastern Bengal," she wrote in the *Indian Review* of March, 1905. "The air is tense with expectation, with sympathy, with pride in those grim heroic people and their silent struggle to the death for their svadeshi trade. Quietly, all India is assimilating their power. Are they not a farmer people engaged in a warfare which is none the less real for being fought with spiritual weapons? . . . This svadeshi movement is an integral part of the National Righteousness. . . ."

New industries were created spontaneously, transforming economic life. The people manufactured anything and everywhere, because in so doing they became conscious of their own freedom. To start with, there were soap, matches, paper, ink; then pottery, bricks, and lesser trinkets. But the great effort was made in the houses where the Hindu spun and wove, himself, the cotton that he himself had grown. The self-appointed

weavers set up their looms in the back alleys, while their wives washed, dyed, and spun the raw cotton. The children polished newly cut wood to make spindles. By and by, the fine Manchester muslins were replaced by coarse Khaddar cloth. It was soon a sacrilege to go to the temple clad in imported clothes.

Svadeshi had even reached the shrines of the gods. Thousands of Hindus had vowed at the shrines of Kalighat and Puri never to buy anything that was not svadeshi. All these sporadic industries, most primitive as they were, brought one immediate advantage: the little money that was in circulation remained in the hands of the Hindus. A perceptible increase in prosperity (if it could be called that!) was quickly seen in the congested quarters and slums of the city. There was more food in the shops, and there were new articles for sale.

Nivedita watched all this and cheered it on. "Hold out! We are coming to help you!" she would exclaim, the moment she learned of any hardship. At the same time, she and her assistants stood guard to make sure that svadeshi retained its noble and dignified character, and to emphasize it as a means of unity. The "empty bellies" of the districts regularly devastated by flood or famine had to become positive elements in the struggle, and to join with those sections of the Moslem population that rebelled because the religious basis of svadeshi, supported by the Hindus, could never be their own. But the national aim was one: the independence of India.

When the salesmen trained in the new selling agencies run by the students of the Dawn Society had learned their jobs, they went off in their turn to found new branches in other parts of Calcutta or in other provincial towns. Barindra Ghose acted as link between the city and country centers. One day he found himself without money, and with a serious responsibility to meet, and he hurried to Bagh Bazar to Nivedita to ask assistance. It was high noon. She came out to see who was there, and did not recognize him at first in the blinding light.

"Who is it?"

"Your Bairn. We are lost! No money! What is to be done?"

"First, do not beg! Money will come through work. . . ."

Nivedita's activities in the city were paralleled by, and complementary to, Rabindranath Tagore's efforts to set up independent rural centers. Their points of view were often highly divergent, but they worked together none the less. Meanwhile, she was making good use of contact with the West.

She succeeded, thus, in sending a group of young men to England, to the United States, and to Japan for professional training courses. They learned wool weaving and the whole technique of subproducts, the manufacture of pharmaceutical goods, glass-blowing, and, most important, the handling of metals. All these were reliable trades, the possibilities of which Nivedita had studied, and on which, through her Western friends, she had gathered a vast documentation. Mrs. Bull had sent magic-lanterns with slides for technical teaching, and Miss MacLeod's friends had contributed a library of technical treatises. When the first specialized workers returned to Calcutta Nivedita helped them to establish themselves.

Several of these young men had been actually forced into a life of action under the subjugation of Nivedita's authority. She was listened to because she radiated a dazzling purity, but men feared her, too, because of her intransigence. She separated with one of the novices she loved most, because he disassociated his functions as monk from the sacrifice that was necessary for the country. To serve Mother India, Nivedita wanted dealers in the bazaars, instructors in the use of tools and machines, lecturers with a real spiritual vocation to influence their pupil's characters. She sought a spirituality that was eminently practical, that mingled with life and had become a part of life. Whenever she discovered some foreign article in the stock of a shop in the bazaar, she was furiously angry. But the most simple Hindu wares—an earthenware cup, a finely made oil lamp costing less than one cent—were full of charm for her. They became the subject of newspaper articles. Her descriptions emphasized the elegance of simple lines, and established canons of taste. She revealed beauties which the Hindus themselves had failed to see, and which they discovered with her.

During the years when the svadeshi movement was at its



height Nivedita stood fearlessly by the Bengal leaders, taking upon herself their difficulties and dangers. She was herself never disturbed, however, and thus it was sometimes possible for her to take the place of leaders who were missing. Her Sunday breakfasts assumed great importance at this time. She also spent months in the work of preparation for the first "National Svadeshi Exhibitions" held at Calcutta during the sessions of the National Congress. In these exhibitions the most diverse articles were on sale: the best weaving, polished wooden ploughs, jams and condiments, sewing and embroidery. Nivedita's school had embroidered the national flag for the exhibition of 1905. She was also among the first to peddle, throughout Calcutta, the first woven stuffs, the first soaps, the first pencils.

In spite of her zeal for svadeshi, and the satisfaction she derived from her labors in it, Nivedita remained essentially, in this as in all else, the breaker-down of barriers within India itself. Through svadeshi, she would gradually win over some refractory section of Hindu society or some religious group which was still hostile; and with her inborn taste for adventure she would open boldly the doors that were most firmly closed. Impersonal, neither offering nor demanding anything, her manner itself moved the Hindus and made them yield to her. Her eyes prayed as her hands showed the work she was hawking. "And you?" she seemed to say. "What have you done for India? Won't you come to our aid?"

So it was that when she called at a house, they did not let her go until her presence had sanctified the entire family. They led her before aged grandmothers, brought little children to her, and introduced her to young wives. They took her to the family shrine, to receive the darshan of the god worshiped there. Often the men would wipe the dust from her feet and ask for her blessing, as if, for them, Nivedita were Mother India Herself, come to their door to beg an offering for the poorest of Her children.

## 40. *Interlude*

IN APRIL 1905, Nivedita fell suddenly ill. The doctor's diagnosis was brain-fever and typhus, and for a month her life was in danger. Two nurses were installed at her bedside; the physician kept her under hourly observation; Christine watched over her with tender solicitude. Sri Sarada Devi came and sat by the bed, but Nivedita did not recognize her. The National Congress was meeting, but she did not know it. Her house in Bagh Bazar was so lacking in comfort that she was moved, with great difficulty, to a house that stood empty next to the home of Dr. and Mrs. Bose. Her friends took turns in giving their services for whatever might be needed; Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the prominent political leader who was Nivedita's associate and friend, sat up through several nights to crush ice for her compresses, and opened a subscription among Congress members so that she might be at once provided with all necessary treatment and care.

At last the tranquil soul triumphed over the stricken body, and the last crisis was past. Was this miracle due, perhaps, to a gift of primroses from a friend in Darjeeling? For here, for Margaret Noble—Nivedita—were the primroses of Ireland. Was it the blood of her youth that brought her back to life? Her smile upon flowers in the valley of death remained a mystery. . . .

In any event, there would have to be a long convalescence. She was not told that Bagh Bazar had been ravaged by plague, and that the school had been closed. Her own coffers were empty. It was Dr. and Mrs. Bose who came to the rescue now, with the suggestion that she spend the entire summer with them at Darjeeling.

Jagadis Bose had gone through her own ordeal and, in the form of difficulties put in the way of his work at Presidency College, was still going through it. His book on botany was finished; but, naturally, a mass of work remained to be done, in correcting, at once, the proofs of the first thirty-one chapters. Nivedita, who had worked with him faithfully, wanted to do this, but, for the moment at least, she was not able to. Worn out by her labors for svadeshi, brought to a state of further enervation by the torrid heat of the Calcutta spring, in convalescence from an illness that had almost taken her life, Nivedita had as yet no strength. She lived withdrawn into herself, and wrapped in thoughts of her guru.

In a letter to her friend she had written:

Is he the final Truth for me? My whole need when I first met Swami was to know in what sense superstitions were true. So others may have learned from him the Universal Truth. I feel that I was already so convinced beyond return of the falsity of all belief, yet my devotional nature told me that this was not the whole truth, and I sorely tossed about. Then came the Teaching. . . . I saw and thought wonderful things when I had fever. I thought that for the first time in India a man had left his mission to a woman. But now I see only quietness and retirement in the future, and I don't seem to matter much.

Thanks to the mountain air and the careful attention of the Bose household, her strength gradually returned. Before she left Darjeeling she was able to work on Dr. Bose's proofs, and to help him once more with her understanding and counsel. It was a help of which he had need. Since the departure of his patron, Mrs. Bull, for America, one misfortune had succeeded another in his professional life; he felt constantly paralyzed by intrigues against him at the College, and he was nervous and impatient. During the past year, Nivedita had aided him greatly by spending with him the two days of the week—Wednesday and Saturday—on which the school was closed. She knew the atmosphere he liked, and provided it for him. The politician, the journalist, the pedagogue disappeared, and she became

merely the painstaking worker, her mind concentrated on the scientific perspectives that lay revealed. Both surrendered themselves to these, in an attitude of pure yoga toward science. They had actually written the book, *Plant Response*, together. And their violent outbursts of disagreement, which often horrified Mrs. Bose, had not mitigated against either their collaboration or their friendship. Now, at Darjeeling, Nivedita was correcting the proofs of this great book, while Jagadis Bose was seized with a fresh wave of inspiration. How well she knew her Bairn! He lived the drama of the scientist who is within sight, ten times over, of an elusive inspiration. She had seen him torn with anxiety before the discovery of electrical resonance, and burst out laughing over the possibility of sending messages in space. . . .

We are gradually finishing the gigantic labor of the Bairn's book on botany [she wrote in the late autumn]. We are both exhausted, for this has been going on continually for one year. But, on the other hand, one's love and pride are more than satisfied for twenty years hence. It is literally true that when I heard Swamiji talk of the Absolute, and all knowledge being within, I said, 'Well, the only proof of this would have to be given in Science. I accept it as a working theory.' And now for the five years that I have been helping my Bairn I have been watching and co-operating in the scientific proof! Blessed be the memory of my guru! The reason why an Indian worker succeeds where others fail lies mainly in his method of vision.

But this interlude in her life was drawing to a close. She was strong again and ready to respond to the needs of her other, less favored, children. In several places the svadeshi movement had degenerated into reprehensible acts of anti-English violence. Returning to this situation, Nivedita noted, strangely, "I am growing more and more sure that I am a man in disguise." But she added: "I look at the little Buddha on my table, alone, exploring the region of thought on and on, up and up. . . . Ever alone. And His hand on the rudder of emotion never trembles. Not one ripple of weakness is felt on that ocean over which He sails. And yet alone to all eternity. . . ."

## 41. *In the Limelight*

SHE RETURNED to the plains soon after the partition of Bengal went into effect on the 16th of October, 1905, and just before the meeting of the National Congress in Benares. She had learned of the partition while she was in Darjeeling, and had been one of the two speakers at the following meeting of protest in Darjeeling Town Hall.

The partition of Bengal—which was to be practically reversed in 1911—aroused bitter opposition, and Nivedita flung herself heart and soul into the movement of revolt which was its result. She struck the keynote of her activity in her speech at Darjeeling:

"Shame on my country of origin! But we shall continue the struggle until the sacrifice and heroism of the children of India compel the English to remove this insulting barrier which divides Bengal, until they treat us with respect!"

She went back, then, to Calcutta, in time to meet Gopal Krishna Gokhale on his return from a mission to London. She had no difficulty with the British officials. The police seemed to have forgotten her. Her six months in the mountains had put an end to reports of her nationalist work. But she, of course, had not changed. On the evening she reached Bagh Bazar she said to the Indian friends who had hurried to see her, "Take heart! Let us be faithful and, above all, ready!"

A few weeks later, the National Congress was to convene under the presidency of Gokhale. Nivedita had accepted the

post, during its sittings, of official reporter for the *Calcutta Statesman*. She settled in Benares, in an old house that had been placed at her disposal, three days before the Congress opened. Her *Statesman* articles were written with a dignified moderation which played down the differences of opinion between English and Hindu. In other papers she was less restrained. But in all, she held aloft the flag of India.

A few days before the Congress, Nivedita wrote in the papers:

What is the real function of the Congress? It must train its members in the new way of thinking which forms the basis of nationality. It must foster in them prompt and co-ordinated action. It must teach itself to emphasize the mutual sympathy which binds all the members of the vast family that stretches from the Himalayas to Cape Cormorin, from Manipur to the Persian Gulf.

Popular excitement was at its height on the day Gokhale arrived in Benares. The crowd did not stop to ask whether he was tired after his long journey: he belonged to them! He embodied the co-operative spirit of the Congress. He was needed by the country. Even his enemies awaited him with absolute confidence. So now the crowd, accompanied by a band of cymbals and drums, and even by jugglers, went to await him, with a state coach, some distance below the Benares railroad station, to give him entry into the holy city. According to tradition, a woman who would welcome the leader of the country. It was Nivedita who was unanimously chosen for this role.

As Gokhale alighted from the train, she stepped forward and offered him the cup of milk which symbolized divine hospitality. Then she placed around his neck a garland made of flowers and camphor pearls, attached by golden threads. The procession moved slowly toward the town, amid shouts of victory. Nivedita followed with Gokhale's friends. Suddenly the crowd surged forward, surrounding the state coach, pressing up to see Gokhale, to touch him. Then they seized an open carriage, made the leader get in, unharnessed the horses, took hold

of the shafts, and themselves dragged this new "coach" through the streets.

It was in such a highly charged atmosphere that the National Congress opened. In their opposition to the partition, and their exasperation over the speeches of the retiring Viceroy, moderates and extremists had joined hands. They had one common aim in particular—to ratify the boycott on English goods. Up to now, the *svadeshi* movement had been considered illegal. It was to announce this grave new decision that Gokhale first went to the platform, after Tagore had stood and sung his hymn to the Motherland. After this, the meetings became more difficult and stormy, with Tilak attacking the remaining moderates who still counseled prudence, and dragging them into the opposition.

"And what part does Nivedita have in all this?" the Prince of Baroda asked Romesh Chunder Dutt. She was hardly to be seen. But her big house in a sequestered street near the Tilbhandeshwar barracks was the meeting-place, every evening, of those leaders who needed to find a common ground of agreement. Here they could meet without risk of their remarks being seized upon by the press. Delicate negotiations were begun between dissident groups or religious minorities. People came and went as they pleased. Friends acted as doorkeepers.

In this old house, with its stone balcony, the lower rooms were used as offices. Here Nivedita worked with a few close friends. Many of the speeches made at the Congress came first to her hands, and left them transformed into impeccable English. They were often redrafted, too, with the help of their authors, and crammed with accurate statistics to satisfy the critics of the government. Nivedita was equally exact in revising the summary records of the meetings.

The Congress meetings naturally took up the greater part of the day. But at Nivedita's house conversation went on until late in the night. A thin mattress covered with white cloth lay on the floor of the room in which she entertained. Sitting Indian fashion in the corner farthest from the door, Nivedita welcomed the guests who sat in a semicircle around her. She

would open the discussion by asking, "What is tomorrow's agenda?" On the evenings when Gokhale came, the crowd would wait for hours in the street and would follow his carriage when he left the house.

It was at one of Nivedita's soirees, when a number of outstanding men were grouped around the Prince of Baroda, and when India had been exalted like a radiant goddess, that Gokhale first spoke of the "Servants of India." The phrase covered a plan that he had nursed for a long time, and now he disclosed his whole idea. Indians of every caste, milieu, and religion would form an association to serve India, according to a given code of honor, like the samurai of Japan. It would be a lay organization aimed at harnessing the wave of nationalism that was breaking out all over India, and canalizing and organizing its power. To serve—that was the whole of Gokhale's religion. When he left Nivedita's house that evening, the "Servants of India" had practically received their constitution. The organization's first members were Nivedita's friends.

When the Congress ended, Nivedita closed her Benares house. But before she went away she spent a day on the banks of the Ganges with the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission who had founded a hospital for the poor. They went together a long way from the city, to a secluded spot where sadhus lived, each in his hut of branches; and there Nivedita talked with God. Then she chose also to find the temple where the child who was to become Swami Vivekananda had been dedicated by his mother to Shiva, Lord of Benares. There, in prayer, Nivedita renewed her vow to serve India with all her soul, and thus to serve her guru. . . .

The Congress of Benares had thrust her into the limelight. During the months that followed she continued to exercise a very marked influence, until suddenly, in December, 1906, the political horizon darkened. Gokhale and Tilak took opposite sides; the schism in the Congress itself, which was inevitable, was to last several years. A harsh and difficult period was beginning, in which Nivedita perforce took part.



## 42. *"Deeds, Deeds, Deeds!"*

WHEN SHE left Darjeeling to return to the plains, she had been given a clean bill of health for a year. She flung herself now into the great revolutionary activities set in motion by Aurobindo Ghose. "No more words, words, words! Let us have deeds, deeds, deeds!" she cried.

Aurobindo Ghose had settled in Calcutta—then the administrative capital of India—as Principal of the newly founded National College. And his influence went, inevitably, far beyond his official functions. What he was doing was to impart an esoteric significance to the nationalist movement, and make it a confession of faith. In appearance a passive type, a quiet—even silent—figure, he was a man of iron will whose work, personality, possessions, earnings, belonged to God and to that India which he considered not as a geographical entity but as the Mother of every Hindu; and he seized hold on the people and created between them and the "nation" a profoundly mystic bond.

The nationalism he taught was thus a religion in itself, and it was so that he had become the teacher of the nation. He wanted every participant in the movement to feel himself an instrument in the hand of God, renouncing his own will and even his body and accepting this law as an act of obedience and inner submission. The goal he aimed for was to make every man a leader in himself, and to create a state-within-the-state, with every part of the whole organization mutually respected. This esoteric nationalism had, logically, no chance of success; just as hostile forces arise against any new philosophy of life,

so he found himself opposed by authority, force, and arms. But the rock of confidence was Aurobindo Ghose's own faith, and his sibylline words which gained weight daily: "Sri Krishna cannot grow to manhood unless He is called upon to work for others, unless the Asuric forces of the world [the dark forces opposed to light] are about Him and work against Him and make Him feel His strength." This injunction to act, endure, and suffer without question—to let oneself be guided by the assurance that God gives strength to him who struggles—required sacrifices which became in turn a reservoir of power from which new fighters drew inspiration to go forward. The individual and the community were no longer separated.

If it was from the history of the Irish "troubles" that the Hindu extremists had borrowed the term "nationalist" to define exactly the nature of their claim, Aurobindo Ghose with his clear insight into the *Swadharma* [law of action] of his own people was suffusing it with a spiritual strength and making it live.

On her return journey to Calcutta from Benares, Nivedita made a long detour into the interior, where she visited a number of rich *zemindars*, to enlist their financial support for her *svadeshi* agencies. But even while traveling she worked, and her newspaper connections gave her a heavy schedule. Her short spontaneous sketches became articles which she sent regularly to *New India*, a periodical which had been established about 1901 by Swami Besant, or to a newer paper which Barindra Ghose, together with Swami Vivekananda's youngest brother Bhupendranath Dutt, had just launched. This paper was called the *Yugantar*. Upendranath Banerjee also worked on it, and Surendranath Tagore was in the same group. When it appeared in its finished form in March, 1906, it represented the definite result of many attempts, each of which had served temporarily, in its way, as a means of infiltration. Now the *Yugantar* was immediately recognized as "the revolutionaries' catechism." It had announced its motto as that of complete spiritual freedom—the political freedom of the country being merely an aspect of this.

"That idea," said Nivedita, "you have got from my gurul

Very good! Give it any form you like in your columns—it is what the crowd will demand very soon!”

The *Yugantar* sold for a rupee a copy, and early in 1907 its circulation reached the figure of fifty thousand.

Nivedita also contributed to Aurobindo Ghose's paper, *Bande Mataran*, and thanks to all this direct and indirect journalistic collaboration, she was invited by Tirumalacharya of Madras to become director of the *Bala Bharath*. “I want to run my paper according to the principles honored in certain regions of our country,” he wrote to her. “I want to place it entirely at your disposal, so as to improve and increase its influence.” In spite of the satisfaction such a post would have given her, Nivedita refused it: she had to remain detached, ready at a moment's notice to replace any “opposition” editor who might find himself in difficulties, and to preserve (between the lines) the tone of “constant sedition” that molded public opinion. She kept up a connection with *Bala Bharath*, however. It followed the form of Mazzini's *Young Italy*; and the great Tamil poet Subramanya Bharati published in it his poems in honor of Nivedita, whom he called his “political guru.”

Throughout this year of 1906, too, she devoted her pent-up energy to many young nationalists who crowded about her. She spent herself freely, but she left it to them to solve the problem of understanding Aurobindo Ghose's “law of honor,” to assimilate it, and graft it onto their daily life. She knew very well what the armed struggle in Ireland had been like. In London she had taken part in active organizations and had lived among rebels. Now on the soil of India the many self-sacrifices still veiled by subtle forms of selfishness had to come forth and express the true Hindu impulse. She well knew that she was both blamed and envied for her Western aggressiveness, whereas in fact she only recognized a right to use violence for those men who were seeking to redeem their inner cowardice. She was often asked, “What must we do to earn the respect of the English?” Her reply was categorical:

“Fight as they would fight in your place, and be ready to face the consequences. But it will be a hard test of sincerity!”

"And what will the consequences be?" she was asked further.

"I don't know!" she answered. "We have no more the right to foresee them than to expect a reward for our sacrifices. That is not our business. Let us be fearless, that is the important thing. The blood we shed will wash us of the accusation of being cowards. Let us get to work on ourselves!"

To the nationalist leaders she said: "Well, go to it! What are you waiting for? There are as many ways of fighting as there are enemies. In Ireland we have a saying which history has verified, 'England yields nothing without bombs!' Every step forward, every reform, has always been wrested from the government, and paid for by a handful of men. But Ireland is proud of its heroes. Where are the heroes produced by your generation?"

She detested pretentiousness and arrogance. Of the Hindus who declared, "We are ready to give our lives for India," she demanded, point-blank, "Can you handle a weapon? Can you shoot? No? Well, go and learn!" She unmasked those who were not sure of themselves, and sent them away.

"To gain the princess of his choice," she said, "Arjuna had a steady enough hand and a quick enough eye to hit the target when he could only see it reflected in a pool. Nowadays the Hindu, because he is accused of cowardice, must possess enough self-mastery to strike and pay for it with his blood: that is the first stage in the yoga of honor." And she added:

"The ideal struggle would be to conquer through nonviolence preached by our sages, but are we capable of it? No! Our generation, reared in the acceptance of submission to the foreigner, lives in a pessimistic atmosphere. Let us start by getting out of it. The nonviolence which in theory we value so much is worthless in practice until the day when we are strong enough to strike an irresistible blow and decide not to do so. The man who does not strike because he is weak commits a sin. The man who does not strike because he is afraid is a coward. Krishna accused Arjuna of hypocrisy because he refused to fight on the battlefield. 'Rise up!' he said to him. 'Go and fight! You speak like a sage, but your actions betray you and show you for a coward!'"

Nivedita maintained this high conception of violence amid the timid youths who still hesitated and were easily intoxicated by their own reaction. There was no doubt, at the same time, that her words shocked her friends. She had to struggle against nearly all of them—all those who approached the problems of the moment with a conception in which reality and ideal had to be adjusted to facts. They were even at variance with themselves. Rabindranath Tagore, the first to throw himself into the political arena, now withdrew. "India is not following the right path," he said. "It welcomes too many foreign elements in its struggle." Nivedita was with him in detesting these elements: she really disliked living a life that was so different from the one traced out for her by her guru. But for her the passive arrow in the hands of the good archer served its heroic purpose, and she felt herself to be, likewise, nothing but a tool. Tagore, on the other hand, was refusing to accept those elements which wrecked his inner joy and harmony, and which warped the silent meditation of the India he sang. Some people accused him of cowardice, egoism, and pride, but in fact he was merely incapable of serving a cause which was beyond him.

At the other end of the scale, Nivedita fought against an unhealthy intolerance which was dividing individuals, falsifying their relations, and sowing suspicion everywhere. In 1906, Gokhale, who was savagely assailed by the extremists, was threatened with death, and Nivedita was thunderstruck. She went from one nationalist to another, demanding, "Did you do that?" and adding, "It's impossible! This is not the time to tear ourselves to pieces." Even in the opposition camp, however, Gokhale remained her friend, and whenever she felt forced to criticize him in public she wrote him a personal letter of apology. In March, 1907, she wrote to him:

I do hope you will not succeed in giving up the Council. That seems to me to be your place, where you are invaluable. Besides, you are some day to be in India what Lamartine was in Paris in the great crisis. I have always thought this was your destiny. Still, that will come to you, whether you remain on the Council or go off. "Thy place in life is seeking after thee, therefore be thou at rest from seeking after it."

Among the young nationalists, meanwhile, there were outbreaks of self-distrust, perplexity, even heart-rending despair. One day Bhupendranath Dutt came to Nivedita with the appeal of a man baffled: "Why is the crowd shouting 'Kali! Kali!' everywhere? Can you hear it? It still wants to be hypnotized. But it's only superstition! Where are we going? Can't you see that we are dying of starvation? We must flee! But where? Where is the *true* India? The India for which the struggle is just? Show it to us!"

She showed it to him, and to others, in the struggles of other countries for independence. In one accelerated movement she relived with them the nationalist uprisings that had created modern Europe. She had sent for a whole case of books on the various events of 1848, and this formed their circulating library. With them she read Mazzini and Cavour, and discussed Swami Vivekananda's lectures and Prince Kropotkin's latest book. She explained to them the secret mechanism that linked organized groups, as it did in Ireland, where each man stood for the honor of the whole group and where orders were transmitted and aims followed with an almost superhuman devotion to duty. She urged them on:

"Seek resolutely the means of asserting yourself. You've been walking in a dream for two generations! How do you expect people to respect you? We must wish the power of infinite and patient sacrifice to truth, to duty, to love: a sacrifice that knows nothing of rest, nothing of conditions, nothing of limit; a power of devotion that says, 'Take! Take!' He who will reach the goal must know how to float on the current of obedience and see nothing beyond the work in hand: 'No plans,' as my guru said to me."

At the same time, she gave of her own earnings and collected, from others, money to establish co-operating groups in the villages of Bengal. Some women even brought their jewels to contribute to this cause.

The summer was hard. There were floods and famine in East Bengal, and Nivedita worked with other women in the organization of assistance. When she went to Barisal and spoke in

her ocher-yellow robe, she collected enough money to give a good meal to five thousand people every third day during the worst period. The pictures she brought back from the famine areas were frightful: people deprived of all necessities, clothed in banana leaves, eating seaweed, dying of hunger in front of their ruined homes. "Mother, give rice, give rice," the women shouted. The only market was one boat that sold cucumbers and pepper plants. For four days Nivedita went up and down the canals in a houseboat, struggling against the current. The water kept rising. So did the prices. Rice became more and more scarce. The panic-stricken animals herded peacefully in the same refuge, as in the legends, the tiger and the cow close together, the cobra curled up between the hoofs of the goat.

But when Nivedita tried to interest the Calcutta public, on her return, her lecture in the Town Hall was ignored.

She fell ill with fever, and was told that she had malaria and must rest. She had personal sorrows, also, to grieve over. Gopaler Ma had died, at the age of ninety, and although her death was peaceful and holy, in observance of the rites of her faith, Nivedita was saddened by the loss of her aged friend. Another friend had been suddenly snatched away, too: Swami Swarupananda, who had died as a young man still, only thirty-four. When she went to Dum-Dum, eight miles from Calcutta, and sought repose in the magnificent retreat of one of the nationalist leaders—a hidden haven in a garden of mango trees—she seemed to hear their voices in death, and the children of Bengal tapping their empty swollen bellies; and the trees were filled with the sobbing of the wind. Was all this a mysterious warning for her that her line of life was beginning to weaken? She withdrew within and prayed: "Mother, what is Your will? For how much longer, Mother, must I still struggle?"

She was very tired. The peace in which Gopaler Ma had died was calling to her. But she still clutched her warrior's arms to her breast. She lived through days of passionate mysticism, burning with fever. Then, suddenly, she gave up.

"My active personal role is finished," she wrote. "May my last will be done for India. . . ." And in a later letter, in Decem-

ber, she looked back on these days: "I sat down one evening thinking, If this were my last word to the Indian people, let me try to write Swami's whole ideal for them in one message. . . . So it might have been really my last will and testament."

Even in giving up, she still worked, determined to complete her service, not merely end it. For three days and nights, with hardly any rest, she was busy writing out a summary of all her many letters on "Aggressive Hinduism." In doing this she relived her experience, heard again the crowds' applause, and their singing, felt all eyes upon her once more. Then the vision would blur. But she still had to make her will. This did not take long. In case she should die before Mrs. Ole Bull, who was now fifty-six years old, what would be done with the money mentioned on Mrs. Bull's charity list? Her generous friend had said that she wished to bequeath large sums for work being done in India, and she wished to have Nivedita free to administer this money. So Nivedita wrote a long letter to Mrs. Bull which she hoped would serve as a codicil in case of Nivedita's own death. The letter read as follows:

I wish to bequeath to the Nation one thousand pounds yearly for an art competition; to Christine one thousand pounds plus two thousand pounds and my share of Swamiji's Works and my books; to Science three thousand pounds at the disposal of my Bairn for Indian Science.

This was in July, 1906. She went to bed dropping with fatigue.

Strength and will power seemed to have dissolved within her. She was prostrate for several weeks. She often wept. Her life flowed past as if in a filter, without light. When she found her way slowly back to life she was a different woman, whom her friends never completely recognized. She had abandoned the proud instrument of her active willpower, to become a much more detached servant. "I am beginning to worship passivity," she wrote, some time later, "as the highest and best mood. I see that one struggles too hard, one shuts out light from all about one. I fear that I too often darken the windows of the house! Peace! Peace!"



## 43. *From Art to Bombs*

IN THE letter to Mrs. Bull which was written as her last will and testament, Nivedita stated: "The rebirth of the National Art of India is my dearest dream." Since her stay at Budh-Gaya she had often spoken of the "unity of India," using this phrase as a symbol to transpose her nationalist teaching to a visual level of civic education. The days she spent at Sanchi, Ujjain, Chittore, and Agra, after the Benares Congress, had made her weep with joy. Once she meditated through an entire night in the jungle, as she evoked the memory of Padmini, the young Hindu wife of eight centuries ago who, in her royal procession, passed over the threshold of the Chittore fortress where she was to reign, and incarnate honor, until her death.

These beautiful historic places, upon which the modern crowd lavished its indifference, were for her the cradle of Indian culture. She was deeply moved, too, by the Japanese love of any form of art, which had been revealed to her by Okakura, as Swami Vivekananda had revealed to her the voice of the Ganges and the song of Mother India's earth. And all this blended in her feeling of unity. "The man who has not the faculty of feeling the beauty and grandeur of Art cannot be truly religious," the Swami used to say.

People would smile when Nivedita spoke of this "yoga of art," thinking that she was merely playing with external forms. Her brother monks did not even approach this understanding of hers. She admired things that no one saw! Her sense of har-

mony, of well-composed lines, remained a dead letter to them and seemed artificial. She was considered extravagant when she perceived the beauty of the old houses of Bagh Bazar, and when she took photographs of ruined temples instead of modern utilitarian buildings. There is a story that when she was in the company of the Gaekwar of Baroda, in 1902, she joined her hands in salutation before a temple of Kali and exclaimed, "How beautiful!" But when confronted with the tasteless college buildings she cried, "How ugly!" Whereupon the Gaekwar said to Aurobindo Ghose, "Is she mad?" Now she was accused of image-worship, at which the Hindus—annoyed by the English scorn for their gods—had taken umbrage. But what she was perceiving was the deep beauty that lay behind the image itself, what was actually life in the old culture of India.

Nivedita found little sympathy or support around her except in the receptive intelligence of an Englishman, E. B. Havell, head of the Calcutta School of Art, who had a group of extremely promising Hindu pupils. But they were taught to copy Greek plaster models. Nivedita was dumfounded.

"I can teach a man to draw and paint," Havell explained to her, "but I cannot make him an artist or a genius. . . ."

"Fool! But I can!" she commented, in a letter. "Love of country, love of one's fellows, hope for the future, dauntless passion for Indra\*—and there will be such a tide of art, of science, of religion, of energy, as no man can keep back!"

Havell introduced her to his pupils. Three months later one of them, Abanindranath Tagore, brought her a picture which at last satisfied her, after she had rejected several attempts. "It is a huge outline cartoon, from which my girls will make a banner in flat appliquéé tints," she said.

For Nivedita, a country that rejoiced in its mimes, in the splendor of its nuptial processions, in its religious ceremonies and dances, had all the elements with which to celebrate its history, as Puvis de Chavannes celebrated French history and immortalized Law, Honor, and Order in his frescoes in the Panthéon and the Sorbonne. To explain this painter's *"Sainte*

\* The King of the Gods, personification of force.

*Geneviève veillant sur Paris*," or Rodin's "*La Force*," became the object of her leading articles on the significance of art. Then she published reproductions of Italian primitives and Renaissance works and interpreted their universal significance. She submitted with great care these explanations of art forms which at first sight were completely incomprehensible to the Hindu mentality, as Hindu art is to unenlightened Westerners. But these forms were sowing fruitful ideas of virility, which could be grasped intellectually and which brought the Hindus to see their own treasures anew and discover a new meaning into them. This, the Hindus needed; Ajanta frescoes and Ellora caves were at that time completely forgotten and uncared-for, mentioned only by foreigners in their comparative studies. In Nivedita's articles, the Ajanta frescoes celebrated the unity of India.

These articles were generally published in the *Modern Review*, a new periodical which was discovered through Jagadis Bose. "What is this providential review, and who is Chatterjee, its editor, whom I've never heard of?" she demanded. Ramananda Chatterjee was a professor at Allahabad, a literary enthusiast who was anxious to obtain collaborators in his work. He kept besetting Bose for articles. "I haven't any myself," the scientist replied, "but I'll have a word with Nivedita."

It was only after a long correspondence that Nivedita and Chatterjee met. They got on well together. They were of the same age. His caution and her audacity proved to be complementary characteristics. "I will try to see that you don't suffer from lack of articles," she said; and she kept her word. She got her friends to write them, made a selection, and herself produced a number of anonymous "notes" on every sort of subject. She even allowed Chatterjee to censor many of her political articles before publishing them, to soften the force and harshness of their tone. Another of her functions was to teach Chatterjee the principles of Western journalism; and when he had a long illness she even replaced him as editor. The *Modern Review* made a strong appeal to new writers and artists, who discovered both masters and disciples through its channels: a new impulse in "Hindu life" was emerging on the horizon. Chatterjee worked

with great wisdom and an admirable sense of proportion through this volcanic period. Always restraining Nivedita though never damping her ardor he watched her sow and weed, strike and create, with the freedom of a being having gone beyond death and life. While the country was bent under its burden of sorrow, she lived completely merged in the essence of its freedom one day to come.

But what was not realized was how fully conscious Nivedita was of this freedom, and how much she had used it to shake off the petty engagements she had contracted. That was the price she paid to have her hands unbound.

She had now finished that most intimate work which had been in silent gestation for more than four years within her: the book of her life, *The Master As I Saw Him; Pages from the Life of the Swami Vivekananda*.

Several times she had taken it up and laid it aside. When, at the time of Swami Vivekananda's death, Miss MacLeod had suggested that she write the life of her guru, she had replied, evasively, "I shall, perhaps, but later! Let's wait a little while! Such a biography must be so simple and pure, and express the living hope of India. . . ." She had been content to assemble all the material she could find: his letters, papers, drafts and books, poems.

During the years immediately following she had tried to write, but the subject was too much for her. She wept as she wrote, and felt incapable of producing a biography which was not essentially subjective. She accepted her defeat humbly and laid it at the feet of her guru. She abandoned the attempt until she should become like a mirror in which his face might be objectively reflected.

Then after her illness in 1905 she set to work again. On a new road to Damascus her guru was walking at her side and stretching out his hand to her. She had only to let herself be guided. The idea and the form became one. She was now so sure of what she wrote that she could say, "I have attained samadhi in grammar, whatever I write becomes the language." The first chapters, published in the *Prabudha Bharata* in April,

1906, revealed a Swami Vivekananda hitherto unknown, who was human and simple, a real Saint Francis of Assisi summoning the poor and the animals, opening his heart and soul, disclosing his greatness and his weakness, while the enthusiasm of the Bengali made an avatar of him. Swami Vivekananda's humanity was what India needed. Nivedita transported her readers into her own spiritual experience, and her moving confession brought tears to their eyes. As they read, people rose up and followed in the footsteps of the patriot saint.

On the flyleaf of the book, when it was finished, she wrote only a few words of dedication: *Salutation to Mother!* In this way, she rendered pious thanks for the opportunity of serving which had been granted her. "I prostrate myself before the Divine Mother. *Jaya! Jaya!*" was the prayer she repeated every day, indifferent to everything that might happen to herself.

She was indeed in danger of deportation, and knew it. She was living, for the time being, in the big house of her friend at Dum-Dum, which was safer for her, and since her recent illness she had made only brief visits to Bagh Bazar. Political differences between Moderates and Nationalists had developed into an open clash, the government in its anti-Indian policy was moving against civil servants and professors, and to work in the opposition ranks signified a readiness for imprisonment. Arrests and deportations heralded the outbreak of open rebellion. The first bombs exploded in May, 1907. The prisons were full.

During the whole of this period, Nivedita's activities were so inextricably mingled with those of the nationalists that they cannot now be isolated. Whether she was at Dum-Dum or Bagh Bazar, her house was a refuge with food, money, and maps for those who had to escape. She did not remain unimplicated in the manufacture of bombs in the Muraripukur Road Laboratory, and she was constantly helping the friends of Barinda Ghose. Hem Chandra Das had been sent to France to investigate the technique of explosives, but before he came back, Ullaskar Dutt had, after many dangerous experiments, stumbled on the method of making melanite.

Nivedita did not hesitate to help these amateur chemists as best she could. Daringly, she smuggled them into the laboratories of Presidency College as assistants to Jagadis Bose and P. C. Roy, who was professor of chemistry. Both needed laboratory aides. Both were of course quite unaware of Nivedita's audacity in the matter of providing them. P. C. Roy was known to be of a dreamy, poetic nature, and was often careless. He had a reputation for goodness and piety, and he lived in semipovertry, giving most of his income to those who were in need. Every evening he would sit and chat with friends for a long time, on a seat in the Curzon Garden. Returning home, he would pass by his laboratory and walk around it. He knew very well that some of his keener students were working late, with the help of the assistants, but he asked no questions. The only trouble was that they used too much acid. . . . Professor Roy often tidied up after them, and cleaned the blackboard carefully. But he never made any comment. How grateful to him she was!

These students worshiped Nivedita. That year they took her with them to Belur for the celebration of Swami Vivekananda's birthday, which had become a real festival for students as well as for the poor. They camped on the banks of the Ganges and then made their pilgrimage to the room where Swami Vivekananda had died. As Nivedita appeared on the balcony, on this occasion, the people gathered on the lawn gave her a sudden great ovation. "Speak to us! Speak to us!" they cried.

"Shall I?" she asked, turning toward her friends. She was moving toward the balustrade to address the crowd, when one of the students said to her abruptly, "Don't speak! Just give a blessing . . ."

She understood. The police, hidden in the crowd, were watching and listening. To satisfy the students, she joined her hands above her head and cried, "*Wah! Guru ki fate! Glory to the Gurul!*" Then she took the flowers she had just been offered, and scattered them before her. The throng shouted back, "Glory to the Gurul!"

Bhupendranath Dutt was one of the students exercising more caution on Nivedita's behalf than on his own. A few weeks later

he was himself arrested, as editor of the *Yugantar*. Nivedita hurried to the judges and learned that a bail of ten thousand rupees was needed, and that Bhupendranath's friends had vainly sought to raise the money.

"I've got it in my bank!" she cried. "Take it all! I will beg in order to replace it."

The prisoner was condemned to one year of hard labor, on a charge of sedition. "He is brave and good-humored about it all," Nivedita reported in a letter. "He takes his punishment with erect head and undimmed eyes. But he says, 'It is extremely unpleasant for a gentleman.'" To him, she said, "Bhupen, remember you belong to Mother India. Keep that love undaunted. Do not build a family; you are to belong to the country."

Other members of the *Yugantar* staff were also arrested, and Nivedita had much to do for them. She flouted authority, and she used her secret funds—subscribed by her friends among whom was a wealthy prince—to bribe policemen and warders. She was helpless in front of the women and children abandoned. She adopted them, and looked after them herself.

But the fact that she had openly tried to free Bhupendranath Dutt meant that Nivedita was now disgraced in the eyes of the government, and that she was herself in danger in India. The nationalist leaders begged her to choose voluntary exile, so that she could continue to serve the country from abroad. For weeks she had been trying to arrange that Jagadis Bose's long leave of absence from Presidency College should coincide with Mrs. Bull's trip to Europe, the idea being that she would leave India with the Bose family. But in the present circumstances she decided to let the Boses go first, as an advance guard. She would follow, she planned, unnoticed.

When she left on the 15th of August, however, it was a swifter departure than she had envisaged. She had received word from Prince Kropotkin that he and his wife were returning to England from their vacation in Brittany and had arranged to meet her in London.

She was entering on two years of voluntary, and very active, exile from the Eastern land of her love and adoption, to the Western world where she was born.

## 44. *Exile*

ALL THROUGH the eighteen days of the voyage, she had the feeling that she was coming out of a nightmare which itself concealed a ghastly failure. And although she mastered that haunting impression when she reached Genoa, she had a sense, on crossing Europe, of a changed atmosphere, a cynical and ostentatious show of prosperity, an absorption in the tumultuous present, that made her wonder what she was doing, or could do, here. "Why have I come back, really?" she asked herself, and did not know the answer.

When she reached London, however, and found the road of activity opening before her, she was ready to plunge into work. Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod, who were there for the "season," met her and were prepared to organize her stay. The Boses were expected to arrive in a few weeks, and would share a household with Nivedita. She intended to found a pro-Indian information center in London. Conditions were so favorable that she was able to settle and begin to put her plans in operation without delay.

To this end, she rented a comfortable furnished house on Clapham Common, slightly off the beaten track. S. K. Ratcliffe lived nearby, and offered her every assistance; his excellent associations with the British liberal press made his support very valuable to her. When she went into town she stayed in the princely house Mrs. Bull had taken in Westminster, and sometimes she would spend two or three days in the country with



some Irish friend or with Prince Kropotkin; but she maintained a rigorous silence about these last excursions.

After her struggles in Calcutta, no milieu could have been more refreshing than that of London. What wonderful characters, what superb opponents, the English were! They liked her frank attitude and bombarded her with questions about India.

During the winter of 1907-1908, she became a pet of London's "high society." She was the center of attraction at Lady Sandwich's salon. On the day she spoke of her Bagh Bazar school, Emma Calvé gave a recital. When she described her trip to the famine-stricken regions, at the Russian Embassy, people rushed there to hear her. After the Dutchess of Albany suddenly decided to attend one of her meetings, the English aristocracy took her to their hearts. The women questioned her and envied her freedom. The men were flattered by the ironic wisdom of her arguments. The doors of the House of Commons were opened to her whenever Indian affairs were on the agenda. She was not wasting her time.

She took up her journalistic activity again, supported on the one side by Ratcliffe and on the other by Head of the *Empire*. Her articles explained Britain's policy to Calcutta, while her English editorials raised the question of Bengal. Her visits to the House of Commons gave her information of which she made good journalistic use. She was in close contact with Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the publicist and poet who urged England's withdrawal from Indian affairs. Shortly before leaving India she had met Keir Hardie, the British Labor leader, who had come to Bengal to make a personal investigation of conditions there and, now, in London, she took part in the controversy stirred up by his letters and with a handful of Indian nationalists, welcomed him on his return to England.

The news from India grew worse. When Nivedita learned of the passage of the Newspaper Act ("Incitement to Offenses"), which suppressed all the nationalist papers, she trembled with rage. "Let them emigrate!" she cried. And now she understood what her function in London was: it was to act as liaison officer

between the scattered Indian nationalist centers in England, on the continent, and in America, and to reorganize by clandestine methods the publication and distribution in India of the banned newspapers. Her various journeys were in accord with these activities, though she tried to adduce other reasons to explain them. For example, her journey to Ireland in September, 1908, to see her recently married brother, coincided exactly with the proposals of mutual assistance made by the Irish separatist journalists to the editors of Bengal.

This visit to Ireland, which she took in company with Mrs. Bull and the Boses, was a revelation to Nivedita. She was seeing her native land again after an absence of fifteen years. She kissed the earth and let it run through her fingers. She greeted the trees, the ivy, the hedges that imprisoned the wandering night fogs. Everywhere the wind-swept ruins and the sea spray told her of perennial struggles, and of the traces of an ancient pre-Christian Aryan culture. She stopped to speak with the laborers in the fields, and heard them boasting about Ireland, with a passionate longing for liberty. Before their hardened and vigorous faces she wept over the fate of the Hindus who were so ill prepared for the struggle. Seeing this, her brother felt a pang of jealousy because Ireland had been ousted by India in her heart.

From Ireland she went to America. Mrs. Bull offered her this opportunity and she accepted it without hesitation. With her friends she left Europe in October.

In the United States she filled two roles; that of journalist and lecturer, and that of mother to many Hindu youths who, with the help of Mrs. Bull, were studying there and had been joined by political exiles in the past year. Bhupendranath Dutt, his prison term ended, was one of these exiles. Students, apprentices, manual workers, they were all learning useful trades. They needed money, for the funds allocated to them did not last long; more had to be begged for. Nivedita was also planning to buy a house, for political refugees, at Chandernagor in French India. During the three months that she spent at Mrs. Bull's

house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she was working constantly in pursuit of these aims.

For Christmas, many friends of India gathered to hear Nivedita reading from the Bible and the story of the birth of Krishna. Swami Pramananda—one of the first monks of the Ramakrishna Mission to establish a center in America—was also the guest of Mrs. Bull at this time. Then she set out on a lecture tour which was to take her from Boston to New York and Baltimore. She was in the midst of this when she received the cabled message that her mother was dying. She returned to England at once.

She arrived in time, at her sister's house at Burley. The sick woman was awaiting her with the smile of a soul already face to face with God, and in the unshakable assurance that her daughter would come. She had remained motionless, without desire, almost without breathing, so that the flame of life should not be consumed before her Margaret was there, her warm hands on hers, her heart in hers.

"My beloved mother, in the light of your eyes I see the heart of God."

"My beloved daughter, you are the certitude of God's tenderness."

"Birth to the life divine is like human birth. Love and prayer go with it into the mystery of Death."

A serene life filled the room. All thought of fear had fled. Nivedita *felt* beside her the presence of her guru showing her the way. She knew a quietness full of inner joy.

As Mary Noble felt herself growing weaker she desired to partake of the sacrament of the Holy Communion with her two daughters; she wanted to share with them the Bread of life and the Blood of redemption. The village clergyman brought the sacred host, spread the white cloth, filled the cup, broke the bread. Nivedita experienced an ineffable felicity, her spirit completely surrendered. "My Lord and my God! Let all that is within me bless Thy holy Name. . . ." On the evening before, she had talked at length with the clergyman; now she bowed her head as he gave her a special blessing in Jesus' name.

The question of whether Nivedita had broken with the Christian church has often been discussed. This incident may throw some light on that question. Once, in 1911, the Swami Nirmalananda was asked, "Tell us something about Nivedita's conversion to Hinduism." "What do you mean?" he responded. "Vivekananda made a greater Christian out of her. She always remained herself, and was great therefrom. With her love and charity she served India; that is all." It may be counted a part of her "remaining herself," in her belief in the universality of religion, that she was saying "*Om Hari Om*," as she watched her mother enter upon her last sleep.

Suddenly she felt the last physical ties snap within her. The mold of her human shape lay before her broken, turned to dust. She felt all her child's love for her mother slip away from her and cover the dead with a cloak of tenderness. For a long time she looked at this love, as it were from outside. The air was full of prayers. She had a sense of being comforted. The love of her mother, now detached, would always protect her. . . . With open arms Nivedita welcomed this new inner life that was issuing forth from the ashes of death: "O Shiva, Shiva, Breaker of forms, may your creative power fertilize this mysterious gift. I am fainting under its power. . . ."

For several weeks after her mother's death Nivedita stayed with her family, living in the past. Her plans were vague. Dr. and Mrs. Bose were arriving from America in April, and she was waiting for them. When they came, they were both ill and needed her. It was decided that they would return to India in July.

Meanwhile, she worked for India up to the last moment of her Western sojourn. Hindu newspapers had begun to appear in European cities, with the support of groups of refugees, solidly entrenched and staunchly led, in London and Paris. Among these papers, in all of which Nivedita took a keen interest, were *The Indian Nationalist*, in London and Paris; *Talwar*, in Berlin; and *Bande Mataran*, in Geneva. A few weeks before the departure for India, a visit made by Dr. Bose to Wiesbaden gave Nivedita an excuse for a last tour of inspection on the continent,

as far as Berlin. En route for Marseille, where they were to take their ship, the travelers stopped at Geneva. There, in the offices of *Bande Mataran*, Nivedita learned that Colonel Willy Curzon had been murdered by a Hindu in London. The atmosphere was charged with crisis.

She did not know what to expect on her return. But her impatience to tread the sacred soil of India carried her forward, ready for any event and any sacrifice.

## 45. *The Last Battle*

SHE LANDED in Bombay in mid-July, 1909, alone, under an assumed name, disguised. No one would have connected with Nivedita the smartly dressed woman who stood on the first-class deck watching the ship dock. Dressed in the latest fashion, with an elaborately trimmed gown and a large white hat covered with feathers, she looked down idly on the passengers who were hurrying down the gangway. Her friends had written her, "The police are threatening to arrest you as soon as you land." In these circumstances, "Mrs. Margot" had taken her precautions.

From Bombay to Calcutta, she traveled in a reserved compartment—not a very likely place to look for a nationalist—and was accompanied by a bearer who was skilled in the art of piloting English tourists. . . . Before reaching Calcutta, moreover, she changed from the express to a slow cross-country train. The Boses, meanwhile, had taken a different route back to India.

Arrived in Bagh Bazar, Nivedita retained her incognito for more than three weeks. None of the policemen who watched the comings and going of the sisters of the school was interested in her. An American disciple, Devamata, had come to help Christine, and when she arrived her presence alarmed the police. "Are you Sister Nivedita?" they demanded. "No!" she replied. As Christine was the other Sister, this sufficed. Nivedita's fashionable disguise aroused no suspicions! It permitted her to walk about the town without any trouble, and to re-establish contact with the circles she had left.

She had indeed returned to turmoil and trouble. The "Ali-

pore conspiracy" had been discovered two months before—money, books, tracts, bundles of pamphlets printed in Paris and the United States, arms and explosives—in a house which belonged to the family of Barindra Ghose. Arrests in number had been made, there were long-drawn-out trials, and a program of raids and repression has been answered by bomb-throwings in the towns. Nivedita learned that her faithful friend Barindra Ghose had been condemned to death. He was twenty-six years old.

He had been regarded by the judges as one of the main-springs of the conspiracy, having preached the gospel of independence from district to district, and having organized a system of recruitment for a band of impressionable youths who were imbued with the principles of discipline, patriotism, and self-negation, and ready to sacrifice their lives. Although he had been born in England, he refused to be tried as a British subject. His further crimes of having founded the *Yugantar* and other secret societies, and having distributed arms, caused less surprise than his spontaneous confession "giving the most damning evidence of the plot. He had contrived the scheme, designed the means, and inspired the work."

The sentence of death upon Barindra Ghose, and upon Ullaskar Dutt, who was also condemned, was not carried out, and at the end of a year it was changed to transportation, for life, to the Andaman Islands. Barindra was released after fourteen years. Aurobindo Ghose, meanwhile, was acquitted after one year of preventive arrest. Of the thirty-four people tried, some fifteen were given severe sentences.

Returning to this situation, Nivedita found that most of her friends had disappeared, some of them under heavy sentences in fortress or prison. Tilak, with his six years' term, was one of the latter, and Nivedita kept up a regular correspondence with him through the editor of his paper, the *Mahratta*, who visited the prison every week. Others of her friends were hiding in the jungle or fleeing farther afield. She felt broken not only for them but for the weakening of the movement through the loss of its leaders.

Even the Belur Monastery was menaced, under suspicion of harboring political exiles. It was rumored that after the Alipore trial two notorious revolutionaries whose cases had been dismissed, Devavrata Bose and Sachindranath, had become probationer monks. The government protested and put a police cordon around the monastery, which was not removed for several years.

It was undeniable that several conspirators had been wearing the ochre-yellow robe when they were caught. It was also well known that the crowd instinctively associated the renunciation of the exile with that of the sadhu and protected the former through the anonymous disguise of the pilgrim and the sanctuary of the inviolable temples. Every sannyasin came under suspicion. Twice Swami Brahmananda had to defend his spiritual sons and the integrity of his organization. He alone was aware of the tremendous vocation felt by the new recruits. He was deaf to the threats of the police but tightened the rules of the Order so as to protect himself. No layman was allowed to enter the monastery. All the monks' external activities were suppressed, except their missions of charity. When the news of Nivedita's return spread, Brahmananda had the Calcutta dailies repeat the publication of the independence of her work.

Aurobindo Ghose was now out of prison, and Nivedita had her school decorated, as for the most auspicious festival days, to celebrate his release. She found him completely transformed. His piercing eyes seemed to devour the tight-drawn skin-and-bones of his face. He possessed an irresistible power, derived from a spiritual revelation that had come to him in prison. During the entire ordeal he had seen before him nothing but the Lord Krishna: Krishna the adored and adorable, the essence of Brahman, the Absolute in the sphere of relativity: the Lord Krishna had become at the same time prisoner, jailer, and judge. Long afterward Sri Aurobindo described, in a letter, this period of his life:

I was carrying on my yoga during these days, learning to do so in the midst of much noise and clamor, but apart and in silence. . . . My *sadhana* (spiritual practice) before and



afterward was not founded on books, but upon personal experience that crowded from within. In the jail I had the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* with me, practised the *Yoga* of the *Gita*, and meditated with the help of the *Upanishads*. I sometimes turned to the *Gita* for light when there was a question of difficulty, and usually received help, or an answer, from it. . . . I was constantly hearing the Voice of Vivekananda speaking to me for a fortnight in the jail in my solitary meditation, and felt his presence.

Now, released from prison, Aurobindo Ghose found his party discouraged and downcast. With a mere handful of supporters—Nivedita among them—he launched an appeal and tried to rekindle the patriotic spark in a weakening society. His mission was now that of a *yogin* sociologist.

The two newspapers which he founded—the *Karma-Yogin* in English and the *Dharma* in Bengali, both violent in tone—preached this lofty aim, which the *Karma-Yogin*, appearing on June 19th, 1909, was the first to define:

. . . The life of the nation, which once flowed in a broad and single stream, has long been divided into a number of separate meagre and shallow channels. The two main floods have followed the paths of religion and politics, but they have flowed separately. . . . We shall deal with all sources of national strength in the past and in the present, seeking to bring them home to all comprehensions and make them applicable to our life, dynamic and not static, creative and not merely preservative. . . .

Economic and political news of the *svadeshi*, the regroupings in Bengal, Gokhale's efforts in the opposition party, Nivedita's easily recognized articles, information about exiled nationalists and deportees—all this was joined and mingled with Aurobindo Ghose's spiritual teaching. He was already known as the "seer," Sri Aurobindo, although still involved in political life, and as yet not manifested to his future disciples on the spiritual path. For Nivedita he was the expression of life itself, the life of a new seed grown on the ancient soil of India, the logical and passionate development of all her guru's teaching. Aurobindo

Ghose acknowledged Sri Ramakrishna, "Whom many would call a madman," he said, "a man without intellectual training, without any outward sign of culture or civilization, who lived on the alms of others—such a man was sent by God to Bengal, to the temple of Dakshinesvar, and the East and the West. The educated men, men who were the pride of the university, who had studied all that Europe can teach, came to fall at the feet of this ascetic. The work of salvation, the work of raising India, was begun." He said, again: "The work is far from finished, it is not even understood. That which Vivekananda received and strove to develop has not yet materialized."

Aurobindo's open and logical method of presenting his own spiritual experience, and revealing the divine message he had received in his solitary meditation, created the necessary unity between his past life of action and his future spiritual discipline. He said: 'When I first approached God, I hardly had a living faith in Him. . . . Then in the seclusion of the jail I prayed, 'I do not know what work to do or how to do it. Give a message.' Then words came: 'I have given you a work, and it is to help to uplift this nation. . . . I am raising up this nation to send forth My word. . . . It is Shakti that has gone forth and entered into the people. Long since, I have been preparing this uprising and now the time has come, and it is I who will lead it to its fulfillment!'

Nivedita thought she could still hear the voice of Swami Vivekananda stirring up the masses: "Arise, sons of India! Awake!" That had been the first phase of the struggle. Now this life-giving cry was repeated differently, because the effort required in the changing circumstances was no longer identical; but the source of it was still the same! Now the new order was that every individual should become a *sadhaka* of the nation—a seeker—so that "the One could find Himself and manifest Himself in every human being, in all humanity." Aurobindo Ghose was throwing out the first ideas of the integral yoga he was to teach, depicting man in his cosmic reality. At the same time in the Transvaal there was another young leader, named Gandhi, practicing with thousands of Hindus the doctrine of passive

resistance. Was Aurobindo Ghose to become the leader of another movement of collective consciousness? No, his mission was of a different nature. He was, as Nivedita understood him, the successor to the spiritual Masters of the past, offering the source of his inspiration for all to drink from in yogic solitude. Since his imprisonment at Alipore, Aurobindo Ghose was no longer a fighter, but a yogi.

The *Karma-Yogin* ran to thirty-nine issues. The twenty-ninth had just left the presses when news came of fresh persecutions which directly threatened the paper. The government had evidently taken offense at Aurobindo's attitude, and at that of the group of patriots who sat under his leadership in Sukumar Mitra's house in College Street, his temporary quarters, where Nivedita was a frequent visitor. The full scope of Aurobindo's vision was revealed in long conversations there, and made the listeners gape with astonishment.

One day Nivedita was warned by a young friend that the Criminal Investigation Department intended to deport Aurobindo Ghose. She passed on the information to him immediately, through the usual network of runners.\* Although he replied by publishing a letter to allay the government's fears, other incidents which suddenly developed made it necessary for him to quit his post. He left in response to a divine order which he could not ignore, and he placed his paper in Nivedita's hands.

When she received Aurobindo's hasty message asking her to edit the *Karma-Yogin* in his stead, and when she realized that he had gone, she meditated for a long while, so as to keep her *sang-froid* and to understand how the nationalist movement was collapsing about her. The present was repeating the past: again she had the task of another to finish, and the same wave of power, in the same direction. But this time the task was short. For her it was also the last episode of the great epic in which she had lived for ten years—the independence of India, her guru's dream, the guiding thread of his life. Now it was all being carried away. "*Hari Om Tat Sat. . .*" She was, after all,

\* There are several versions of how and when Nivedita warned Sri Aurobindo. We give here her own story.

only an instrument. But in the evening, on the edge of the Ganges where she had gone with Gonen Naharaj—the novice at her service—she sat crying by the waters. That very night Aurobindo Ghose had left for Chandernagor. The stars reflected in the great river were like so many beacons of hope. She felt convinced that this failure in the growth of national consciousness would produce, some day, perhaps within a lifetime, a victory from apparent ruin.

Nivedita was entirely responsible for the final numbers of *Karma-Yogin*. Among extracts from Swami Vivekananda's lectures she inserted many articles of her own over Aurobindo Ghose's signature, as well as the last two chapters of *The Ideal of Karma-Yogin*, which she wrote as a precise summing-up of the yogi's teaching. No one suspected. In the thirty-sixth number, dated March 12th, 1910, she published her credo. This prayer was really her will: her renunciation of all political life. She had composed it as she drew for her pupils the flag of free India—two gold *vrajas* in the shape of a cross, on a red background.

I believe that India is one, indissoluble, indivisible. National Unity is built on the common home, the common interest, and the common love.

I believe that the strength which spoke in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, in the making of religions and empires, in the learning of scholars and the meditation of the saints, is born once more amongst us, and its name today is Nationality.

I believe that the present of India is deep-rooted in her past, and that before her shines a glorious future.

O Nationality, come thou to me as joy or sorrow, as honor or as shame! Make me thine own!

NIVEDITA.

Although Nivedita kept a firm hand on the reins, as editor of the *Karma-Yogin*, the absence of Aurobindo Ghose began to cause uneasiness. It was rumored that he was a prisoner of the English. It was also rumored that he had gone abroad to enlist support. Other tongues accused him of having deserted his fol-

lowers and changed his tactics. In her paper's last number but one, Nivedita published the following announcement:

We were greatly astonished to learn from the local press that S. J. Aurobindo Ghose had disappeared from Calcutta, and is now interviewing the Mahatmas in Tibet! We are ourselves unaware of this mysterious disappearance. As a matter of fact, Sri Aurobindo is in our midst, and if he is doing any astral business with Kuthumi or any of the other great *Rishis*, the fact is unknown to his other *Roshas* [bodies]. Only as he requires perfect solitude and freedom from disturbance for his sadhana for some time, his address is being kept a strict secret. This is the only foundation for the remarkable rumor which the vigorous imagination of a local contemporary has set floating. For similar reasons he is unable to engage in journalistic works, and *Dharma* has been entrusted to other hands.

Another number of the *Karma-Yogin* appeared on the second of April. A week later, Nivedita learned that Aurobindo Ghose had reached Pondicherry and had found a refuge there. A few of his most faithful followers, who were to become his disciples, had joined him there by another route.\* The following day Nivedita, with her usual biting irony, told the English press where the Nationalist leader really was.

Nivedita's task was accomplished, completely and faithfully. But the strength that had been given her to perform it was abruptly withdrawn. Suddenly she felt herself so weak that she hardly had a thought which was her own. Then she fell back on her Divine Mother. She had laid down the burden that had been placed upon her.

With Aurobindo Ghose gone, she remained alone, confident in her guru and his vision. "Margot, go ahead—always," Swami Vivekananda had told her. "Some day you will know peace and freedom. . . . And Mother India will know victory. . . ."

That was the humble beginning of the "Sri Aurobindo Ashram" which has today 899 sadhakas. Since the death of Sri Aurobindo, as a memorial for the development of his work, an International University center was opened in April, 1951, to students from all over the world.

## 46. *Kedarnath*

SHE HAD never foreseen the moment when she would look back on her life and see it slipping away from her like a broad-flowing river with its tall colored *dhow*s and its heavy dirt-covered lighters, with the songs of its fishermen and the shouts of its bargees, and, echoing in the twilight, the music of conches and puja bells wafted down from the lighted houses. For a long time she had followed in her guru's footsteps, never moving out of his shadow, content through her own developing personality to reflect the light. Then, suddenly, she had had to take over the leadership. She had played her part in the great struggle. Her work had expanded rapidly and yielded abundantly. Now it was all over.

This newly won freedom transformed her life, and made her a different woman. It was the freedom Swami Vivekananda had sought at the same stage of his life, with the sole object of serving the Divine Mother. Nivedita remembered the imploring words of the monk, in their childlike simplicity: "Let me worship my Divine Mother in those wild retreats where voices cannot reach!" She, likewise, had become as simple as a child. For her this state of grace was the miracle for which she had so earnestly striven, and which, now that she strove no longer, was within her. Achieving it, she forgot her struggles. She drank at the spring of pure delight.

In her humility she sought the blessing of Swami Sadananda, who for several months had been nursing uncounted maladies

in his fever-stricken body. The old monk was exhausted and broken, a hollow-cheeked invalid, sensitive and touchy. Nivedita had been profoundly saddened when she had found him in this condition on her return from Europe. She had gone to him in a village of northern Bengal where he lacked every comfort, and had brought him to the house of a friend next to the school in Bagh Bazar. Here he slept on a wooden bed, with his clothes hanging on a line strung across the room. His "furniture" consisted of three earthenware pitchers that stood on the floor, but through the window he could see the green trees of Nivedita's garden. It was like the monastic cell of a medieval cardinal who, having put off his red robes, had become his naked self. Nivedita noticed that he had abandoned his monk garb, and also his austere devotions; he was nothing but a mass of suffering life. Why? She bent over to question him.

Swami Sadananda seldom talked much, and never of himself. He pursed his thin lips until the cry of suffering became a paean of joy, as the leaping flame escapes from the log consumed in the fire. His suffering was, in his own way, his austerity. The deeper he plunged into this dissolving darkness, the more transparent became his soul. His face and hands were like carved and gilded ivory. Everything hurt him, even the lightest touch. It is said that Saint Augustine in the same condition could eat only with a silver spoon; Sadananda liked to drink milk and honey from a silver bowl. No nourishment was delicate enough.

His eyes perceived a vision, and one day, during a bout of fever, he murmured, "The land of Kailasa." He was reliving his meeting with Swami Vivekananda at Hrishikesh, where he had received his sannyasa. He remembered the very words exchanged between himself and his guru. "But, Swami, am I ready? If there be a fall?"—"If there be a hundred falls, no matter! I am responsible! I have chosen you, you have not chosen me!" Was the sick man still dragging his body over the Himalayan roads toward his guru? He said to Nivedita: "The land of Kailasa, that is where you must finish your life's pilgrimage. The supreme Master Shiva is there waiting for you."

He spoke as one who is certain of what he is saying. Dying

men often have this uncanny power. He was remembering silently, too, that country where one seeks Shiva, sees Shiva, is Shiva oneself. . . . There was no need for him to go; but Nivedita had to, and quickly. He looked at her with infinite tenderness. He had no more need of anything. Six years before, Swami Vivekananda had appeared to him in a vision and had spoken to him, shown him the way. What was now necessary was that Nivedita should go to the land of Kailasa, and carry the message back. Then he could sleep in peace. . . .

Nivedita had already heard this summons from the mountain. But her practical existence was now linked with that of the Boses. She waited, made no plans. It was at last Jagadis Bose himself who suggested a journey to the North during the hot season. He and his wife, his nephew, and Nivedita would leave the lowlands in early May and would follow the clear tracks up to the valleys of the Himalayas to visit Kedarnath and Badrinath—the two great temples that every Hindu hopes to see once in his lifetime. Why not? For Jagadis Bose it would be a journey of scientific and ethnographic discovery, although he well knew that the members of the Brahmo-Samaj group would criticize him for going there. At all events, everything was arranged so that Nivedita need not reveal to her friends the real meaning of her wanting to go there.

The travelers spent several days in Hardwar, the traditional first stage astride the Ganges, where hundreds of pilgrims live. Nivedita's party had to find a guide who was well acquainted with the route, knew the night refuges, and could organize the caravan with porters, palanquins, pack mules, and ponies. A cook was sent on ahead to reserve accommodations in the dharmashalas—those shelters that were half bazaar and half caravansary, scattered along the route.

As for Nivedita herself, she was letting life slip by, enjoying her freedom. She needed nothing, demanded nothing. She would sit on the Ganges' banks listening to the great prayer-symphony, of which she would seem to be a single note calling upon the name of God. Shiva! She knew she was looking toward Him, to that mountain that is His dwelling, to live in Him and



through Him. The conch knows not the breath that is to blow through it. Sitting among the women who crowded onto the Brahma Kund Ghat, she took part in the prayers that were chanted for hours. Suddenly, that very night, she realized the seriousness and solemnity of what she was doing. This pilgrimage was the final dedication of her life, like a rosary of prayers strung out for forty-eight days in succession, in glorification of Shiva. She gathered a handful of dust and pressed it between her fingers. She herself was that dust, and the very silence in which Shiva had modeled it and also freed it of form. She worshiped Him in all His forms, in His glory and His light, in His Oneness and in His creatures. Yonder in His dwelling she wanted to see no more, to feel naked and pure in her soul, to be at the same time what is no more and what will be, simply what is. . . .

The party set off, the women in palanquins, Dr. Bose and his nephew Aurobindo on ponies. After a five-day journey they reached Srinagar; and then came the high mountains with all their dangers. Nivedita covered the mornings on foot with the passing pilgrims. Their prayers upheld hers, intoned them in answer. The whole mountain of Kedarnath rang with hymns of devotion. Strange power of Shiva's incantation: like the hammer on the anvil, it breaks the resistance of the strong and removes the timidity of the weak. "O Destroyer of obstacles, protect me as I stray in the desert of the world's suffering!" The voices were repeated incessantly: "*Jai kedar nath Swami ki Jai*, I prostrate myself before Shiva, God of good augury, granting happiness, Destroyer of Sin, Vanquisher of Death. . . ."

Jagadis Bose's nephew watched Nivedita with fascination. She seemed so different here from what she was in Calcutta! Where did her true personality lie? At the halts, she talked science with his uncle, asked questions, and plunged with him into the symbolic interpretation of cults. The details of their comfort, their food and lodging, seemed to interest her for the moment as much as Bose. But she attached no real importance to them. Then what surprised him more was that she never spoke of Shiva, even though His name was re-echoing on all the

mountainsides. Was she worshipping Him in secret, with all the fervor of the superstitious Hindus? Aurobindo had surprised her putting ashes on her forehead, and had not been favorably impressed. He questioned her, and she answered:

"Come and walk with me in the morning, but ask nothing. That would be useless. Be content with loving and admiring piously what you see around you, for every gesture is a prayer. Don't you see that here, in the great Unity, reigns Shiva, the Guru of gurus? You don't know Him yet. Don't ask Him yet. You must first find your guru, in life, who will lead you step by step along the path. Shall I try, dear little one, to tell you a bit about how we must come to the guru? We must come in a great stillness of the soul—all other thoughts, all other teachers and loves and friends, fall into the background as we stand before Him. We come as Arjuna stood before Krishna, giving his whole self, forgetting all his past, standing as he was, with folded hands, before him, giving ear to the words of the *Gita*. That is it. Whenever we stand before the Guru, it is to hear the words of the *Gita*. We have to remember that he is not a man at all, in one sense, for he is a great truth, one with the truth, and that is that truth which we must strive to see. In another sense, of course, he is always a human being, always one of us, for we love him, and would pour out our very life at his feet, if only that would serve him!"

She climbed the mountains with the pilgrims, and shared their mysticism. The path would sink down to the valleys, then mount the steep rocks, to fall away again into the scree. A hard path it was, to the top: a path assigned by God. . . .

One morning Nivedita saw a woman seized with dizziness on the edge of the precipice: she could neither advance nor retreat; the void held her spellbound. She shouted. Nivedita ran to her, clutched her close to give her confidence, and led her back to a safer spot. For a long while she walked by her side, until the memory of fear had disappeared and the woman looked at her with clear eyes. Then together, peacefully, they took up the prayer of light, as it was chanted by the pilgrims: "O Shiva, Thou who dwellest on Mount Kailasa, Thou who triumphest

over death, protect me as I stray in the desert of this world's suffering. . . ."

Old men and invalids, fortified by their faith, marched on, suffering great hardships to be with Him who is the essence of sacrifice. Every pilgrim brought an offering in his heart: a flower, the discipline of a whole life, a difficult renunciation, the submission of the intelligence, the abandonment of force, a courageous effort. The secret recesses of the soul stood bare like the mountain slopes in the sun, and the blinding light consumed the noxious poisons of the heart. The journey to Kedarnath was a triumphant hymn of resurrection. Shaking off their weariness, the pilgrims pointed their staffs toward the summit: "There is our goal! There is the lingam of life! All the sages have confirmed it; the sacramental rites prove it. Shiva gives life after death! He offers His perfect meditation, the living grace which is a promise. *Namah Shivaya, namah Shivaya!*"

Nivedita and the Boses had made strenuous efforts to reach Kedarnath on a Monday, the most auspicious day of the week. They arrived in the afternoon, when the temple was closed until the evening worship with lights, offerings and hymns. The pilgrims waited in throngs, crowding into the single street of the tiny village that nestled among the rocks. In the blue glow of the twilight, the snow on the mountain peaks gleamed under the first stars. Suddenly there was a rush toward the temple; bells began to ring; a delirious shout of joy arose—"Jaya, jaya!" Their hands outstretched, their voices hoarse, people pushed and jostled forward. Swept on by the crowd, Nivedita passed suddenly from the darkness of the night into that of the temple.

She could see nothing in the gloom. She could only sense the breathing of all the perspiring bodies pressed tight together. She also heard the sound of water dripping on stone. Here and there was the fitful gleam of smoky lamps. Everywhere was the passionate surge of prayer, surrender, submission.

She remained motionless, not thinking, not feeling. For how long? She listened to the furious beating of her heart. Shiva's trident was knocking, breaking the mold, dislocating the solid frame of her body. "I am life, I am life," the mystic sound went.

*"Shivo'ham, shivo'ham,"* came the panting breath. She felt herself seized with the cold divine death, then consumed with fire. She prostrated herself.

For a long time she stayed there passive, lost in the present moment, which contains eternity, while time passed. Time had no more existence; all was lost in the gray ashes and the incense fumes. In a moment of intimate perception, she knew "That which is."

There was a new expression on her face when she rose; but she felt a divine weakness within herself, and she staggered. It was only gradually that she became conscious of the moment before, the moment after, of time which is yesterday and tomorrow. Her thoughts went racing on and were transformed instinctively into acts of worship. She wept. "O Shiva. . . . The golden lotus of Thy heart bursts out from my narrow breast. I bear it away in silent felicity. . . . O Shiva, art Thou there before me? Are we then already separated from each other?"

In her rediscovered identity she felt a strange complexity of emotion: distressed and overwhelmed, at the same time freed; her prayers answered and a grace bestowed on her. Shiva had freed her from movement, from action. She now perceived her Divine Mother Kali reabsorbed in Her principle—a motionless contemplation, Divine Energy in its essence. She had known for ten years that this moment would come at last. O mystery of suffering! She was recalling her revolts at Almora, in the midst of which her passionate love for India had been born, and at Amarnath, which had heralded this last stage of her life's pilgrimage.

"I had to worship the Mother to get the energy to carry out Swami's will," she wrote in a letter, "but there comes a moment in eternity when that will is done. . . . I retire now, and love and worship only Shiva for ever and evermore."

She felt her Divine Mother depart from her. She watched Her going, saw Her fade away and become a power outside her, which she could worship in her calm and silent weakness, her hands joined—a spectator of the clash of the terrible dualities.

But what, now, was to become of herself, bereft of passion,

will power, and memory? Any kind of anguish was a sacrilege in that land of Kailasa where the earth itself is the contemplation of involved power. The mountains with their rock skeletons bared by the winds and the rains were so many calm and oblivious images, the fleeting eagle just as much part of the whole as the temple itself. There was no remembrance: only the enjoyment of that which is nameless, of that which is both the source of the Ganges and the cloud, bringing back the sea to the mountain. The pious recollection of the guru himself, who had led her to Amarnath, had vanished; so, too, the memory of her hands offering purple hibiscus to his image—all-powerful idols worshiped in the secret of the heart and in the vision of the soul, which are all thrown one day away because form has lost its meaning.

She relaxed in this complete surrender of herself. Now she had to take up the staff again, and go down from the mountains and live her life in the world in perfect harmony with "That which is eternal."

The Boses were so preoccupied with the beauty spots of the journey, the details of the pilgrimage, the brilliant processions, that they noticed nothing of Nivedita's behavior. The descent was difficult, because Mrs. Bose had fallen ill. They had to hurry to reach the Tibet road, where the spaciouly built dak bungalows would give her more comfort. Then came the climb toward Badrinath, the twin temple to Kedarnath, where Lord Vishnu is worshiped. At Kedarnath it had been the passion of renunciation; here there was the communion between God and His worshiper in a narrow sanctuary. Early in the morning the worshipers walk around the temple, telling their beads, lost in a vision of God. . . . Sweetness of Badrinarayan, temple of love and compassion, where the dead for whom prayers are offered find an infinite peace in the light! "Glory to Badrinarayan!" sang the pilgrims, throwing flowers into the gorge. Nivedita's great pilgrimage was ending in a surge of fervid worship.

The way back was long. In the evening of the 29th of June the travelers reached the station at Kotdwara and caught the train bound for the plains. It was precisely the forty-eighth day of Nivedita's vow. For her, all was accomplished.

## 47. *Final Tasks*

YEARS AGO, on her return from the pilgrimage to Amarnath, she had plunged into a life of action. Now, coming back from this other pilgrimage, she entered upon an existence of quiet meditation. But the one did not oppose the other: her work was completed now, and she was crowning it with the fruits of her experience—or would, as soon as the last threads were gathered up, the last duties done. . . .

She went and knocked on the door of Sri Sarada Devi, to receive her blessing.

All the most enterprising, as well as the most contemplative, of Sri Rāmakrishna's sons in religion knew the secret of Sarada Devi's silent withdrawal which brought to each of them the inspiration he needed. After one look at her daughter, the saintly woman gave Nivedita all that she sought, by telling her quite simply of an incident in her own life:

"One day, long ago, Sri Ramakrishna had summoned me. I was twenty. It was spring, bursting with life. In his kindness to me, he said, 'In the garden there is a small house. Go in, and shut the door. It is there that you must live. Meditate and pray. One day the door will open, and many will crowd around you calling you Mother!'"

Meditate and pray. . . . Nivedita still felt the pulse of life about her. How she longed for that dynamic immobility, full of secret life! But there were still several tasks to be finished before she could close the door and meditate with her face

toward the north. She spent the succeeding months in cutting herself free. . . .

First, there was her school.

Materially she was no longer part of it—she only taught now and then—but she maintained it financially, and its purpose and development were her responsibility. In 1909, the school had been closed for more than four months, and in 1910, the holidays ran into five months because of lack of funds. Christine had been summoned to America by her family, and the date of her return was uncertain. During this difficult period, Nivedita chose to leave the school entirely in the hands of the first brahmacharinis she had trained and who lived at the school. In the beginning there were waverings, of course, but young Santoshini had a firm hand and soon gave the school a pronounced Hindu outlook. It made quick progress, and long before Christine came back it had established itself, no longer as Nivedita's own mission but as a school bearing the name of its founders. Other brahmacharinis spoke of getting together and opening similar schools in other districts of Calcutta.

In this transfer of power is to be found, also, one of the tenderest and least-known pages of Nivedita's life. She had never sought to establish a boarding school, but circumstances had decided that, in a sense, she should do so. Among her pupils were several child widows who required her special attention. She had taken in only a very few, for they became her responsibility, insomuch as religious custom did not allow a widow to return to her family after she had left it.

The first who had come were sixteen years old. They were so tiny and wretched, with their shaven heads, and their white veils always falling over their faces! Then others had come, even younger. On the death of their husbands, whether or not their marriage had been consummated, they were forced to lead in the midst of their family a life of strict continence, fasting, and self-denial. Nivedita's school had seemed like a paradise to them.

The *Matir Mandir*, a special section in the school, was established on the day when Nivedita gave these children quarters

in a room overlooking the inner courtyard. There, under the watchful eye of Santoshini—the first Hindu to dedicate herself to Nivedita's ideal—they lived a life of devoted piety. Strict rules and regulations had to be applied to train these young widows as nuns, ready to help those who were even less fortunate than themselves. When Sarada Devi was in Bagh Bazar, they used to go to her once or twice a week for spiritual instruction. Sometimes Nivedita went with them. On such days she wore the ocher yellow dress.

She could not improve their material lot, but she taught them a new outlook and gave them a new aim in life. One of them, not yet fifteen, said to her, "I want to be a doctor."

"You will," Nivedita replied, "if you do the work I give you."

She trained them to take charge of the day scholars along with the pupil-teachers who came daily. Several of these were from Brahmo-samaj families, to become later Rabindranath Tagore's first assistants in his famous educational institution, Shantiniketan. When these girls arrived in the morning, they would go straight to Nivedita's room next to the alcove where she meditated. They often saw her lost in herself, her face bathed in tears. She looked so far away that the girls would pray, "My own, my own—come back to me. . . ."

One of the things that she undertook at that time was the effort to introduce a sense of beauty and harmony into her pupils' narrow lives by laying out a garden for the school. In the summer of 1910 she wrote to Miss MacLeod:

We are going to have the garden. I hope to begin planting on the first of August. The lease is signed. I mean to have a patch of flat open grass and a blazing border with flowers tumbling over the top of the wall toward it. . . . My imagination runs riot. . . . Oh, what a joy I expect from it! It is a piece of land at our corner. So Swamiji's early promise bids fair to be fulfilled at last. And the cup of Karma is getting full. After a while, all the good will be exhausted—and then? As for a garden, a real garden, the very soil is sacred. I do want zinnias, sweet peas in many colors, gorgeous things like sunflowers. . . .



The *Matri Mandir* pupils formed part of the household. They shared Nivedita's successes, as well as her poverty when the school was closed. She relied on them implicitly. "If it is not my business to know how the school will develop," she said, "it is not my business either to know how these children will interpret my message, become their own. . . ."

Thus she gathered up the threads of one activity, completed one task. A more difficult chain to break was the one which linked her to the writings of Swami Vivekananda. Apart from his book on Raja-Yoga, written in England, he had left behind him only a mass of confused drafts and hurried notes. The many lectures which Goodwin had taken down in shorthand had required very careful editing. Nivedita had joined forces with a team of pious and reverent workers. Her work was solid. The disciples recognized, and were carried away by, the Swami's mystic enthusiasm, expressed in Nivedita's impassioned style. After working at *Karma-Yoga*, she was putting the finishing touches on *Jnana-Yoga*. This was to be her final task.

When she realized this she felt a wrench in her heart, so great was the desire to perfect the mold of her guru's work. But her life of spiritual fulfillment was no longer in harmony with this activity. With passionate renunciation, she sacrificed it. She gave up, in favor of the monks, all she possessed: her vision of her guru, and her power of interpreting it. She gave them the autographed letters she had received in America, for the *magnum opus* they were preparing. It was to be called *The Life of the Swami Vivekananda, by his Eastern and Western Disciples*. Although Nivedita was no longer working, she thus continued to have a part in a creative task.

Her own writing did not cause her much anxiety. It consisted of various essays on education, history, and civics, inspired by questions of the moment. She was to let her successors make use of them. But she took the greatest care with her *Diary*, a collection of block-notes which she always carried with her, and in which she wrote daily comments on the political history of India as it was evolved behind the scenes of the Congress. Some of these notes dealt with the work of Dr. Bose, and other mat-

ters. Several copies of these documents had been distributed and the originals entrusted to a close friend, to await the time, ten or twenty years later, when a Hindu would consult them for the history of the period.

Suddenly she was confronted by a totally unexpected, and indeed unimaginable, ordeal.

She was at Darjeeling for the summer holidays when she received a telegram telling her that Mrs. Bull was dying of pernicious anemia and asking her to come to her in Boston. Nivedita had promised that she would look after her old friend, wherever she might be, if the need arose; and now she set sail for the United States immediately, to keep her promise.

She found herself at a tragic battlefield. The self-willed Mrs. Bull, whom Swami Vivekananda had called his "second mother," was struggling to hold on to her life and her money. She no longer trusted anyone. The terror in her eyes turned to supplication when she saw Nivedita, and she clung to her desperately, wanting her beside her day and night, thirsting for her love and peace. But the great soul of Dhiramata, that Nivedita knew so well, was fleeing now from all light, all generosity, all desire for perfection. In the darkness of her delirium she perceived only two haunting faces: her daughter Olea, whom she had driven away; and her adopted son Jagadis Bose, who had fled from her authority. The mother, who in her passion for them had forgotten how to love, pushed them away from her.

Nivedita intervened in this terrible struggle and strove until a little love had found its way back into Dhiramata's wild heart. As Nivedita meditated near her, the sick woman rediscovered for brief moments her spiritual life, the triumphant memory of Swami Vivekananda, the joy of giving. At the same time her health seemed to improve; in a few weeks the crisis was past; there was talk of convalescence. Nivedita seized the opportunity of bringing Olea back to her mother, and Jagadis Bose to his "foster mother's" memory. But it was only the soul that was reborn. The body died.

Then, suddenly, drama broke out. Olea—that strange woman whose life was streaked with shadows—accused Nivedita of in-

triguing. Why had she come so far to look after her mother? Had she not brought poisonous fruits from India? Had she not influenced her mother to make favorable legacies? Olea had plenty of money, but it was not enough for her. Attacking on all fronts, savagely and passionately, she tried to destroy the works of charity that had brought her mother such unalloyed happiness. She brought suit to contest her mother's will.

Nivedita did not hit back. Was it her place to struggle in that dark night? She had asked nothing. But Mrs. Bull's amazed relatives took refuge behind her, and she was obliged to defend herself in order to protect them. From what? What could she say?

Suddenly she realized. Shiva—she thought of the god, and called upon his name. She knew why the problem of possession was returning to her like the monstrous serpent Kaliya emerging from the darkness to terrify the worshipers of God. She had prepared the way for it by implanting the forgotten son, Jagadis, in the sick woman's memory, and by bringing back the daughter to her bedside. She, Nivedita, had been seized with a desire to see Olea reconciled with her mother and to satisfy the proudest ambition of her life—the success of Jagadis Bose, Dhiramata's adopted son. That was why the blow had struck her.

At that moment Nivedita withdrew within herself. She plunged alone into the "evil" with which she had identified herself, mastered it, absorbed it until it died within her. "O Shiva, Thou blue-throated god who drinkest the poison of the world," she prayed fervently, "help me! In Thee I am no longer conscious of good or evil. Let me become the conscious spectator of all these fragments of universal harmony. Let me no longer act, but merely radiate Thy Light. . . ."

She loved Olea in her madness, and Bose in his fear of insecurity. During the course of the lawsuit, Nivedita's disinterested attitude leveled many painful difficulties. She defended one child without attacking the other, until the hydra, bereft of its prey, recoiled. When she felt that she was no longer necessary, she went away.

She made a rapid return to India. In England, where she

spent only a fortnight, her friends saw in her a woman aged by ten years. They tried to persuade her to stay for the Universal Races Congress which was to be held in July, but she refused—promising, however, to send a paper, which she would write on the ship. (Incidentally, Nivedita's name is not mentioned on any list of members of that Congress, but in the Acts of the Congress there is a thirteen-page paper on interracial problems, with the title of "The Present Position of Women.") She made her last landing in India at six o'clock on the morning of the seventh of April, 1911.

Dawn is breaking over Bombay harbor. The hilly islands rising out of the water are shrouded in a grey light which they are gradually putting off. And the smell of the hot sunbaked soil comes across the water, and across the little boats with their swallow sails. And it is India. . . . India at last.

She felt exhausted. But it is impossible to note the profound intimacy of this homecoming without remembering Margaret Noble's first arrival—ignorant, fascinated, bewildered, alien, eager—thirteen years before. . . .

She was still grief-stricken over her friend's sad death and the wretched tumult that had followed it when she learned, four months later, of Olea Bull's suicide. In the same letter, Dhiramata's brother gave her the news that the lawsuit had been lost, and also that he would give to India the sum stipulated in the contested will. Nivedita asked only to withdraw, to meditate. . . .

## 48. *The End of the Journey*

THE PERIOD through which she now passed appeared, on the surface, to be the most sterile of her life; actually it was the richest—a period spent in meditation, and filled with the presence of divine beings. The school was temporarily closed, and Christine had gone away; she was at Mayavati, working on Swami Vivekananda's biography, and would later join the Brahmo-samaj College—a position which, Nivedita thought, would give her the independence of a leader.

Nivedita lived alone behind closed doors. She had not taken up her journalistic work again; and the consequent loss of income left her so poor that it is doubtful whether she had enough to eat. She refused all invitations, and she never went out. She seemed to have no more duties to carry out. From appearances one might judge that all her plans had gone bankrupt, and many who did not know the real truth pitied her. As a matter of fact, she was doing no work now except to help her Bairn, and to write a few stories about the gods who came to visit her. She received them piously and had long conversations with them, which she wrote down. She bought the flowers they liked, especially the white daturas, and laid them at the feet of Shiva, while Gauri, Uma, and Shankara played with the sun and the stars, the pinkish fogs that welcome the day, and the warmer mists of twilight. Nivedita kept her shutters drawn so that the divine messengers should not be disturbed. Every hour was equally rich in serenity, beauty, and piety.

Those who understood the life of the imagination—the painter Nanda Lal Bose and his friends—were the only visitors allowed. Their master, Abanindranath Tagore, often came with them. They surrounded Nivedita with a touching homage because she, with infinite skill, had taught them that the public would one day appreciate their Hindu work for its own sake, and she had made them give up the idea of copying the West. She described to them, in her own fashion, the symbols, the atmosphere, the form, and the color in which the Golden Legend of India was born, and how its mystic art is engendered. The myths took on their full spiritual value in these hours of living prayer.

She always sent her friends away at dusk. They knew that the twilight hours belonged to her. Two old men-servants whom she had kept with her sat in the courtyard with some neighbors and chanted the *Vedas*. Nivedita did not admire their poor singing, but merely the incessant repetition of the incantation, which emphasized the rhythms within her soul. The voices of the singers rose in supplication and resounded like the crack of the carter's whip before it falls on the back of the sluggish animal. For Nivedita, it was the unity of the being, in motionless serenity, divine abandonment.

She had removed every picture from her room. The temple of her soul lay bare, like a wineskin dried up by the sun. Was there any need to fill it? Even the desire for God no longer tempted her. She watched with serene calm, lost in the harmony of eternity.

A time came when, for some reason unknown to herself, she wanted to behold a real flame: a flame which would illumine what she perceived in the heart of Immobility, and which she could put out when she no longer needed it. She knew that this wish was like a step backward in her spiritual life, but the flame would help her as the clamping-iron in the rock gives a hold to the climber as he crosses a chasm. As she meditated before this flame an unexpected image imposed itself on her mind: a wonderful statue in black stone, the image of Prajna Paramita, the Ultimate Wisdom of the Buddhist. It had been

given to her by her friend Dinesh Chandra (whom she had helped in the revision of his book, *The History of Bengali Language and Literature*), and he had hesitated to give it to her, because legend avers that the image requires a jealous cult from its worshipers and finally destroys them. But Nivedita would hear none of that, and she paid homage to it in her room with flowers and incense. Its divine presence was like a mysterious stronghold for her, and sustained her while all crutches of her spiritual life fell to pieces about her, one by one.

Swami Sadananda had died in February; and now, in July, her guru's mother, for whom her devotions had made the end peaceful, also passed away. In the house next door Swami Ramakrishnananda, one of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples, lay dying. She loved him. But she suddenly felt herself old, worn out, and when the monk died she did not have the strength to accompany his body to the burning-ghat on the Ganges. She stood for a long time on the Baranagore Bridge after the funeral procession had passed, until, in the glow of the sunset, she saw the flame of the pyre: the same flame which was burning within her—the flame of Infinite Wisdom.

One day, in her meditation, she felt the void that had surrounded her suddenly disappear. She kept her eyes closed. The flame had gone out abruptly, but there was no darkness. "Alleluia!" Around herself she saw a new, transparent, diaphanous beauty. The hours that followed brought her still more life and understanding and joy and harmony. It was no illusion. She had become at once the source and the ocean, and all that passes from one to the other. Before this intensity of feeling, she withdrew into an inner, and absolute, peace.

Then she experienced the richness of which Sarada Devi had spoken, the unsuspected richness that dwells entirely within. Nivedita had become her own observer in that moment of eternity which embraces the future and the past, that immediate moment without form which her guru had promised to her. What did it matter now whether she was sitting meditating in a room or leading the most active life in the outside world? She was like the man in the scriptures, who

"With bare breast and bare feet goes to the market-place,  
Spattered with mud and ashes, smiling broadly,  
Who has no need of the miraculous power of the gods!  
For at his touch the trees spring into full flower. . . ."\*

That summer of wonderful, pure light was short. Nivedita lived like a leaf detached from the bough, with no will and no desire. Life seemed to have come to a standstill around her. She was happy, in a consecration of the heart. When Dr. and Mrs. Bose suggested that she should go with them to Darjeeling for the summer holidays, she accepted their hospitality but let them go on ahead.

They waited for her impatiently, so that they might all go together to Sikkim to visit the temple of Sandakphu, twelve thousand feet above sea level on the Tibet Road. It was the kind of trip Nivedita enjoyed—through mountain defiles and over icy passes. There was a sanctuary which, she told Bose, she would have liked to visit. How good it was of him to have thought of it!

He had hired ponies and engaged guides. The ponies were saddled, sleeping bags rolled, provisions prepared, just as for a pilgrimage. But when Nivedita arrived, she was not feeling well. She was so tired on the day set for departure that the expedition was put off for twenty-four hours. But before the next day came Nivedita was stricken with fever. Two days later Dr. Sircar, who had been called in, knew that her condition was hopeless; he had diagnosed a malignant dysentery, a disease which at this time was almost incurable in the mountains. Only the descent to the plains could have saved her; and it was too late for that.

Her friends, loving and hopeful, tried to hide the real situation from her. But she knew, and was ready. She had awaited this moment so confidently! Shiva was going to meet her. . . . The beauty of her smile revealed her inner peace. For several days she lay without speaking a word, her eyes closed; but this was no sign of weakness: her breath maintained a regular rhythm, in harmony with her inner prayer. Her fingers touched the beads of her rosary, but no longer told them.

\* The song of the barber Upali, in the *Vinaya Pitaka*.



Her consciousness, turned inward, was reposing in God. The whole of her life lay spread out before her like a sunlit river flowing over golden sands, rich in the joy of its source, the caprice of its torrents, the song of its waterfalls, the light falling on its deep lakes, and the bustle of life on its banks. But when one is faced with death the soul frees itself from all its accumulated riches: some disappear lightly as in smoke, others dissolve in tears. Then there is the instrument itself, the body, which must be abandoned with ease and without clinging. Nivedita heard the friends who loved her moving about her, knew that they were trying to keep her warm. But the cold was already upon her, the cold of the snow, the spotless carpet on which Shiva, the supreme God, meditates. Would her plunge into the darkness be but a part of the ever-renewed cycle, the prelude to a new birth? Nivedita smiled, joyful in her surrender.

She felt her body slipping away. First it was the nerves and their subtle reactions; then the muscles, carriers of strength; then the more delicate organs. She lived without eating, ideally pure and beautiful, nourished with strange music, luminous rhythms, and the song of the earth. Mrs. Bose never left her side; she understood the dying Nivedita's tearless serenity.

For eleven days, Nivedita held communion with Shiva. When this was finished, she turned to her friends. But how far away she was! How difficult it was for her to speak to them!

One last joy was reserved for her. Gonen Maharaj, whom Bose had caught up with at Jaipur, arrived in time, bringing with him a basket of ripe fruit from the Belur garden. The monks who had sent it were unaware of Nivedita's illness; they could not have guessed that she was awaiting this fruit before she could die. . . . For her it was the sign of grace given by her guru as the day waned; the sign that her work was really completely finished.

While she still had the strength, Nivedita sought to gather her friends about her, and to eat with them once more. The young student Boshi Sen was there. She handed him over to her Bairn as his disciple. She talked with them until evening,

encouraging and consoling. When she felt that they were at peace, she recited the prayer of her youth:

"I am the straight way, the sovereign truth, the true life, the blessed life, the life uncreated. . . ."

And also:

"From the unreal lead us to the Real,  
From the darkness lead us to the Light,  
From death lead us to Immortality. . . ."

When darkness fell she rested, and was silent. She was seeing the vision of Shiva. The end was near now, and all the friends gathered about her bedside. One of them, leaning down, heard her murmur, "The ship is sinking, but I shall see the sun rise."

At dawn on the thirteenth of October, 1911, she slipped peacefully away. Gonen Maharaj, with filial piety, brought the fire to her lips and took the imprint of her feet.

She was forty-four years old.

When the news of her death became known, a cry of despair went up from the land she had loved. Bengal gave a national funeral to this woman of the West. Covered with yellow flowers, as if with the shroud of gerrua, her body was burned in Darjeeling on the traditional pyre. Sister Nivedita, the spiritual daughter of Swami Vivekananda, was a daughter of India.

Calcutta offered her memorial tributes at the Town Hall. And she received an unexpected apotheosis: her ashes were distributed as so many relics. Some were placed under the altar stone in Swami Vivekananda's temple at Belur, some in Boshi Sen's chapel in Bagh Bazar. Others were deposited beneath the cornerstone of the Bose Research Institute in Calcutta, in 1915. In this great home of modern science Nivedita's name is not inscribed in marble, but a bas-relief showing a woman with prayer beads, holding a lamb, recalls her memory. Yet other ashes were buried amid the honeysuckle in the family grave at Great Torrington, under the sign of the Cross. This ceremony took place on the twelfth of October, 1912: a religious

service conducted by a clergyman and three deacons, in the presence of her sister.

A street in Calcutta now bears the name of Nivedita. Thousands of Hindu girls have grown up in the school named after her. But a more intimate honor has been reserved for her: that of being worshiped to this very day, as the guru of their lifetime, by many illustrious children of India who have devoted their lives to their country, and who remembered her name on the day of Indian Independence. She had wished ardently to march, on that day, behind the flag of India, shouting from her soul: "*Wah guru ki fate—Glory to the Gurul Ja ya, jaya, Mother India!*"

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